

## Jesus, Head of the Church

**Hebrews 7:18 ESV (Pg. 583)** *For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness **19** (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. **20** And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, **21** but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever.’” **22** This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. **23** The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, **24** but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. **25** Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. **26** For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. **27** He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. **28** For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.*

- I. The context of Hebrews 7 is the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ. The requirement of Old Testament law was that priests could only emerge from the family of Aaron<sup>1</sup>, who was from the tribe of Levi. This seems to throw the qualifications of Christ into question, since Jesus descended from the family of David, and the tribe of Judah. But the argument of this chapter is that Jesus is our Great High Priest.
  - A. Hebrews 7 bases this argument on the fact that Christ’s priesthood was after the order of Melchizedek, as prophesied in Psalm 110:4 (you can read more about this mysterious character in Genesis 14:17-20). This is taken as an indicator that the Levitical Priesthood defined in the law was never meant to be permanent. Hebrews 7 points to several problems with the old priesthood.
    1. In verse 18, the law and the priesthood are described as having “weakness” and “uselessness”, on the basis of their inability to make anything perfect.
      - a) This doesn’t mean that the Law was flawed, simply that it’s ultimate purpose was to be **diagnostic**. It could tell you how unlike God you were, but offered no assistance whatsoever towards improving your status.
      - b) It’s like having cutting edge medical equipment that could tell you with 100% accuracy that you are dying, but could not offer treatment or cure.
    2. Because of this, the Law could only temporarily enable us to draw near to God, and that only with fear and trembling. With the fulfillment of the law, and the establishment of a covenant of grace in Jesus, Hebrews tells us, **“a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.”**
    3. Next, the old priesthood had no guarantee of continuance. On the other hand, God has promised Christ on oath, **“You are a priest forever.”** The Law saw many priests come and go, because they eventually died. Therefore, you had a constant rhythm of godly, faithful priests and wicked, unfaithful priests. Jesus remains a perfect priest forever, “because he continues forever”.

- a) **Hebrews 7:25 ESV** Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.
- b) Jesus is unhindered in his ability to save you **fully** though all sin, addiction, despair, persecution, and doubt, because he lives forever! He always presents his perfect obedience on your behalf to the Father! This is a “once and for all” sacrifice, unlike all the blood from bulls and goats continually offered by imperfect priests for generations.
- 4. Lastly, unlike the priests under the law, our Great High Priest, because he is spotlessly sinless and perfect, doesn’t have to concern himself with atoning for his own sins and failures first, before he can intercede for ours.
  - a) Hebrews describes Jesus as “**holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens**”. If you need a priest to plead your case and be your advocate, Jesus is the kind of priest you want!
  - b) Hebrews 7:28 tells us that the oath of God the Father (who cannot lie) has appointed Jesus as a priest, beloved by God and perfect forever!
- B. Knowing this should always result in worship. How can you restrain praise when you think of how the man, Christ Jesus, is seated at the right hand of God as a constant reminder of the end of all sacrifice, penance, and groveling?
  - 1. His sacrifice was perfect, it was “once and for all”; never to be repeated.
  - 2. That means that there will never be a time when God ceases to be pleased with what Christ has done on your behalf; he’ll never renegotiate your forgiveness and require you to do something more for your justification.
- II. Because of Christ’s perfect obedience, and his unending status as the priestly mediator between God and his church, God has also appointed Christ to be the Head of the Church. This theme is repeated in I Corinthians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians and other places as well. This settles forever the question of who really is “in charge” of the church, even as we consider how that works functionally.
  - A. To say Jesus, on the basis of his redeeming work, is the head of the church means he is the only sovereign, all-wise, all-powerful, authority residing above the church. In reality, he is the fully present **boss**, not some “silent partner”!
    - 1. Sadly, that doesn’t mean that every church acknowledges this fact, or is governed in full subjection to his authority, even if they give lip service to it.
    - 2. It also doesn’t mean that churches and leaders that are convinced of this truth, and committed to it, perfectly submit at all times to Christ’s leadership. Human sin will always complicate the best of both our efforts and intentions!
  - B. Our problem with understanding Christ’s supreme authority in the church has been complicated by listening to the deceptions of men rather than the rock-solid revelation of scripture. The Catholic Church, for example, has christened the Pope the “Bishop of Rome”, but they cross the line of blasphemy when they bestow another title, the “Vicar of Christ”, on the Pope.
    - 1. The title “Vicar of Christ”, used by the Vatican for the Pope, comes from the latin term “vicarius Christi”. The word “Vicarius” (root of “vicarious”) means “instead of”<sup>2</sup>; thus, the Pope rules **instead of** (or, “in the stead of”) Christ.
    - 2. According to Catholic doctrine, Jesus granted the rule of the church to Peter in Matthew 16, who began an unbroken line of papal succession all the way

from Peter in the first century to Pope Francis in the 21st. But there are many problems, both historical and doctrinal, with this belief. For example:

- a) Nothing like a plan for the papacy is ever mentioned in scripture; nor is Peter mentioned anywhere as having any special apostolic authority; neither by himself, nor by any other writer of scripture.
    - (1) Additionally, his name is not even mentioned in the book of Romans, (where Peter was supposedly a Bishop for 25 years)<sup>3</sup> even though the book was most likely written only 7 years before Peter's execution<sup>4</sup>!
    - (2) This matters because surely Paul would mention him, especially considering that he specifically mentions no fewer than 29 specific members of that congregation in the last chapter of his letter alone.
  - b) Also, you should know there are gaps in the supposed line of "unbroken apostolic succession"; notably at its beginning, as well as some late opposition to the idea of a pope-like role in the church. As late as 256 AD, the church father Cyprian was arguing at the Council of Carthage that the Bishop of Rome was just one of many bishops, and "should not attempt to be a 'bishop of bishops' and exercise 'tyrannical' powers."<sup>5</sup>
- C. More troubling, this misunderstanding of who's really in charge eventually contributed to the rise of the doctrine of "papal infallibility". In Catholic understanding, this is a spiritual gift, specific to the pontiff, stating that when a pope speaks "officially" on matters of morals and doctrine, he can't be wrong<sup>6</sup>.
- III. But why are we just picking on Catholics? Are Protestants spotless in their understanding of such things? Absolutely not. Every subset of Protestant Christians can be guilty of ordaining "Popes"! If you are Charismatic, it might be Bill Johnson or Benny Hinn. If you are word-faith it might be Joel Osteen or Kenneth Copeland. Even if you're reformed, your pope might be John Piper or John MacArthur!
- A. But even if none of those names mean anything to you, many tend to obsess over the human authority in local churches as well. Usually it's the denominational leader, pastor, or the one person who makes big contributions coupled with big demands. We assume these people "run" things at church!
    - 1. When Ginger and I were growing up in Odessa, there was a wealthy oil man who very publicly got sideways with his church, so he pulled his "big bucks" out of there, and bought and paid for his own church, hiring and firing pastors as "employees", and never allowing any elder oversight whatsoever.
    - 2. I think it was called "When I Say Jump, You Say 'How High?' Fellowship" or perhaps, "My Way or the Highway Tabernacle"!
  - B. Any church fight that results in a church split is always because one side or both was grasping for power that didn't belong to them, and could have been avoided by simply remembering who was really in charge of the church.
    - 1. **Ephesians 1:22 ESV** And he (God) put all things under his (Christ's) feet and gave him as **head over all things to the church, 23** which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.
    - 2. **Colossians 1:18 ESV** And **he is the head of the body, the church**. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

- C. But if this is true, how does it work functionally? How does the unseen Christ rule the church in actual practice? Will the bank let us list Jesus as the guarantor in our financial dealings? Can we make Jesus the named responsible party in our legal documents? Probably not. So how do we, as a body recognize Christ as the real head of NRLC in a world that does not?
1. First, by an unshakeable commitment to his written Word. This means that we don't look to our intellects, our business acumen, our political influence, or our cultural preferences as the first rule of faith and practice; we look first and foremost to the clear, authoritative, sufficient, written Word of God.
    - a) This requires us to be familiar with the Word, and first consult the Word before making any decision. If Jesus is in charge, what he has already said is the most compelling argument in any discussion or debate.
    - b) This also requires that we are people who speak up to one another, and hold each other accountable to the standards laid down in the clearly revealed Word of the One who is to be the Head of his own Church.
  2. Second, where the Word is not sufficiently clear (mostly in specific life situations, or things that arise in culture not specifically addressed in the Bible), we seek the voice and direction of the Holy Spirit, always within the boundaries of God's Holy Word.
    - a) By that I mean that the Holy Spirit will never violate the word of God specifically or in principle.
    - b) When then church faced a widespread doctrinal crisis in Acts 15, they prayed and sent a letter to the churches with these words **Acts 15:28a ESV** "For it has **seemed good** to the Holy Spirit and to us..." They made a decision based on their sense of what they believed the Spirit was saying; none of which was contrary to the written Word of God.
  3. Lastly, we let Jesus rule as the head of the church through **mutual accountability**. This means that no one, no matter how "called" or "gifted" gets to be a dictator in the church, benevolent or otherwise.
  4. I said in a message back on April on eldership, that when Jesus said to Peter on a beach in John 21 to "feed my Sheep", the emphasis was on the word "my". They were not Peter's sheep, and they are not Marc's, Daryl's Don's or Dave's sheep. They are and always will be Jesus's sheep.
- D. Because of this James gives a chilling warning to anyone who would pursue ministry and leadership: **James 3:1 ESV** **Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.** Why is this the case? Because we are stewarding royal property that doesn't belong to us even a little bit! You are Jesus' sheep!
1. So no matter where you roam, if you find yourself in a church with a leader that has set himself up as the final, unaccountable authority, the best thing that you can do for yourself is high tail it out of there.
  2. But be warned! That does not mean that the leadership of the church must bend to your every whim and directive because you too must be accountable to both the leaders of the church and the fellow members!

- E. The Bible says we are to obey and submit to our leaders in Hebrews 13:17; and while that doesn't mean we submit to them blindly, we also have no right to enforce an accountability that we ourselves are not walking in. Jesus rules the church through "mutual accountability". You to me, and me to you.
- IV. Today, we are going to come to the Lord's table. One of the things that we embrace here at NRLC is John Calvin's teaching on the "spiritual presence of Christ".
- A. The Catholic Church teaches that the bread and the contents of the cup, miraculously become, in the partaking, the **literal** flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. We do not hold to that view at all at NRLC. In and of itself, this is just bread, and just grape juice, with no inherent magical or spiritual power.
1. This unbiblical belief is why Roman Catholics treat the elements themselves with extreme (yet misplaced) reverence.
  2. Believing the priests are charged with handling the **actual** body and blood of Christ, they make sure that no crumbs fall to the ground, no unordained persons serve the elements, and that the elements themselves are adored<sup>7</sup>.
- B. Huldrych Zwingli, a Swiss leader of the Reformation, reacting to all this, went the other way, proposing what is called the "memorial view". This means that nothing inherently supernatural happens at the table, that it is **entirely** memorial; an opportunity to remember Christ, but nothing more. I don't think that goes far enough. Communion should be so much more than a "memory jogging snack".
1. It's interesting that in every account of the Lord's Supper, Christ uses very specific words, "This **is** my Body", "This **is** my blood" or "This **is** the new covenant in my blood."
  2. If Zwingli were entirely right, why not say, "this is a **symbol** of my body?" Or "this is a **symbol** of my blood?" It seems Christ was saying much more.
- C. A third view was proposed by John Calvin during the reformation. He taught that through a miraculous working of the Holy Spirit, these "mere symbols", are made to manifest the real, but spiritual presence of Christ; causing heaven to collide with earth in the partaking of these common elements.
1. That means that Jesus Christ is especially present when we partake of this bread and this cup. If that is true, what would that mean to you? Would you come to the table each week expecting to encounter him?
  2. If you are sick, would you expect to be met with healing? If you were doubting or confused would you come expecting to receive answers? If you were in distress, depression, or turmoil, would you come expecting to find peace, joy and satisfaction? If you were enslaved by sin, would you come expecting to meet the only true Savior and find total forgiveness?
- D. In the Gospels, when people heard that Jesus was in their neck of the woods, they came running! The sinful, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the forsaken, the demon possessed all came **because he was there**. They knew that if they could just get to him, he would forgive, heal, embrace, restore, and deliver.
- E. Are you ready for some good news? That **same Jesus** is here and has invited you to his table this morning to experience all of that! All of his grace is here, and he is waiting to meet with you and lavish it on you as you feast on him together with the universal Body of believers!

- V. We have spoke this morning of how Christ is the head of the Church. If you will believe it, I'm telling you that this table is where he proves that. It's where he meets with you, and bestows his love on you. It's where everything we've learned about him becomes real as we gather as one body with all the other saints in worship and gratitude in his presence.
- A. So as you come this morning, I'm calling you to come in faith, expecting an encounter with the living Christ. Don't worry about what that will look like. Just be confident that he is here, and he is more ready to meet with you than you are to meet with him. If you need special prayer, wait around and let one of us pray with you.
- B. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 28:1-4

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/vicar-of-Christ.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/rise-papacy/>

<sup>4</sup> According to the ESV Study Bible (ESV Large Print Study Bible; Introduction to Romans; subheading "Date", Pg. 2343; © 2008 Crossway), the book of Romans was most likely written in AD 57. The death (by crucifixion) of Peter most likely took place in AD 64. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Peter#Death](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Peter#Death))

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/rise-papacy/>

<sup>6</sup> *"Infallibility belongs in a special way to the pope as head of the bishops (Matt. 16:17–19; John 21:15–17). As Vatican II remarked, it is a charism the pope 'enjoys in virtue of his office, when, as the supreme shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, who confirms his brethren in their faith (Luke 22:32), he proclaims by a definitive act some doctrine of faith or morals. Therefore his definitions, of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church, are justly held irreformable, for they are pronounced with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, an assistance promised to him in blessed Peter.'"* (<https://www.catholic.com/tract/papal-infallibility>)

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eucharist\\_in\\_the\\_Catholic\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eucharist_in_the_Catholic_Church)