

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

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CHAPTER SIX

THE ONE TRUE CHURCH

“I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH.” This clause in the Apostles’ Creed is subscribed to by Protestant and Catholic alike, heartily and without reservation. The term “Holy Catholic Church” is not found in Scripture, but the claim implied in the name is soundly scriptural.

All Christians would agree that the first reference to it is made by our Lord Himself in Matthew 16:18: **“Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”**

Christ is the builder: **“I will build.”**

It is His church: **“My church.”**

He is the Rock-foundation: **“Upon this rock.”** Even Roman Catholics acknowledge that the **“rock”** refers primarily to Christ, though claiming that Peter is the rock-foundation in a secondary sense, which Protestants will not admit if the claim is made for Peter only as distinct from the other apostles.

Thereafter the word **“church”** is used in two senses, first in reference to the Church as a family of God, and in many places in reference to a local church or churches, the context generally deciding which is meant. For instance, in Matthew 18:17, the clause, **“Tell it unto the church,”** after the passing of the church’s infancy period, could refer only to the local community of Christians, since the matter requiring attention, a difficulty arising between two Christian brethren, was essentially local.

The great persecution which arose after Stephen’s death fell first upon the church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), but later we find Paul, now preaching the faith he once destroyed, **“confirming the churches”** through Syria and Cilicia. As the Gospel advances, churches are gathered out in many places in many lands, and are referred to individually as the church of God in such-and-such a place, and collectively as churches, as in Romans 16:16, **“The churches of Christ salute you.”**

But the local churches do not cease to be parts of the whole because they are geographically separated from one another. As we shall see, however, the Holy Catholic Church, the church universal, is not merely the sum total of all the local churches. It is more and it is less, for it includes some who, like the dying thief, were never received into the membership of the visible church on earth, while too many others within the visible church never were true believers.

Let us turn to passages in the New Testament which obviously refer to the church as a whole, even when the word church is not used, putting them down just as they appear in the Scriptures.

For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another (Romans 12:3-5).

Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all (I Corinthians 12:4-6).

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit (I Corinthians 12:12, 13).

Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts (I Corinthians 12:27-31).

[God] hath put all things under his [Christ's] feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all (Ephesians 1:22, 23).

But now, in Christ Jesus, ye [Gentiles] who sometime were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both [Jew and Gentile] one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man [the Christian], so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off [Gentiles], and to them that were nigh [Jews]. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto a holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:13-22).

Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:8-10).

For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen (Ephesians 3:14-21).

Christ . . . loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish . . . This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:25-27, 32).

There are other passages which might be added, but let these suffice as a divinely inspired New Testament picture of the holy catholic church, in which, as stated in the Apostles' Creed, we believe, and to which we as individual believers in Christ thankfully belong. Called by His Gospel, and brought to repentance and faith by its message, we have received the Lord Jesus Christ as our own Saviour, according to the Scripture:

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12, 13).

On believing, we were sealed with the Holy Spirit individually, who is the earnest of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13, 14). By that same Spirit, we have been baptized into the body of Christ, His body, and with all other true believers made fellow members of that one body of which Christ is the Head (I Corinthians 12:12, 13). It is a family, “**the household of faith**,” in Heaven and on earth, the church triumphant as well as the church militant, all distinctions of race and nationality, previous religion and social standing, swallowed up in the new heavenly relationship.

Does the Roman Catholic Church history, as we know it today in the world, resemble the picture of the one true church of God presented to us in the New Testament? Its hierarchy of popes and cardinals, archbishops and bishops, priests and monks and nuns, its striving after spiritual and temporal dominion, its lust for earthly wealth and glory, its perversions of doctrine, its superstitions and all too frequent gross and shameful immoralities—these things make us ask whether it corresponds in any point with the church of the New Testament. To ask the question is to answer it, for an affirmative reply is unthinkable. Yet Rome today still claims to be the true and only Holy Catholic Church, outside whose pale no salvation is to be founds

What is the history of this strange and awful phenomenon, a church with such a character, making such a claim? Volumes could be written, and indeed have been written on this subject. Here it is possible only to point out the salient features.

The New Testament church at Rome can probably trace its beginning, with a number of other churches, to the Day of Pentecost, when on that day there were “**strangers from Rome, Jews and proselytes**” (Acts 2:10) in the great crowd which listened to Peter's sermon. It is possible and indeed probable that among those strangers from Rome were some who that day turned to the Lord and found their place among the three thousand who were baptized.

Our earliest positive information is found in Paul's epistle to the church at Rome. His writing of such an important treatise as this epistle to the Christians at Rome indicates what a large place they had in his thoughts, and indeed he says so. He speaks of them as “**beloved of God**,” and says that their faith was “**spoken of throughout the whole world**” (Romans 1:8), and he thanks God on their behalf. Although at the time of writing the epistle he had never visited Rome, yet he mentions some twenty-five of their number by name, and some of them he knew intimately.

He had evidently met them elsewhere.

The church was not perfect, hence his desire to go to them, that he might impart to them some spiritual gift that they might be established (Romans 1:8-12). They needed warning against spiritual pride (Romans 12:3). In view of later developments, how necessary this warning was! He exhorted them to be kindly affectioned one to another, in honor preferring one another, to be patient in tribulation, to continue instant in prayer, and so forth. But on the whole, they were evidently good sincere Christian folk.

When some years later Paul arrived as a prisoner at Rome, a party of these Christians traversed the thirty-odd miles to the Three Taverns to welcome him, **“whom when Paul saw, he thanked God, and took courage”** (Acts 28:15).

Still later, certain of the brethren, doubtless moved by his courage in adversity, became more zealous to preach the Gospel. They did it out of love. But there was another side to the picture, for there were others, at least professing Christians, who also preached the Gospel with increased zeal—but their motives were all wrong, for they wanted to take advantage of Paul’s forced inactivity because of imprisonment, to increase their own influence in the church, and acted with deliberate intent to **“add affliction to [his] bonds”** (Philippians 1:15, 16). If they were Christians, they certainly were not Christlike.

And even in that early stage of church history there were false brethren who had crept into the fellowship of God’s people. Jerusalem had its Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) and Samaria its Simon Magus, whose heart was not right in the sight of God, so that he had no part nor lot in the true catholic church (Acts 8:21). The apostle John also writes of some:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us (I John 2: 19).

It need not surprise us therefore to find the same thing in the church at Rome. So Paul writes to Timothy **“Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present evil world”** (II Timothy 4:10). He had been Paul’s fellow worker (Philemon 24), but at the last had proved false!!

For the later history of the Roman Church we have to look elsewhere, and the information is fragmentary.

In post-apostolic days there were three patriarchates: Rome, Alexandria and Antioch. Each was independent of the others, but when acting together Rome took the precedence, because it was situated at the seat of secular government. When wealthy and influential people were drawn into the church, among them the Emperor Constantine himself, the prestige of the Roman Church was still further enhanced. Its wealth was freely used to help the needy and oppressed elsewhere. Its theology at that time for the most part was orthodox, and contending parties in other churches sought its help in disputes, and in time Rome’s decisions came to be regarded not just as arbitration awards, but as having the force of law.

The word *Pope*, as the distinctive title of the Bishop of Rome, emerged in the fifth century, when the history of the papacy really began. Innocent I (402-417) first conceived the idea of Rome’s universal supremacy, and Leo I carried the plan forward. The barbaric invasions of the century, by overthrowing the civil institutions, served to enhance the influence of the Roman See. When in 476 the emperor transferred his seat to Constantinople, the pope became chief figure in Western Europe. Gregory I (590-604) was notable for his missionary enterprise, and especially for his mission to England.

By the close of the eighth century the pope had asserted his right to dispense with the observance of canonical law. He had assumed the prerogatives of a universal metropolitan, and made it a rule of the Western Church that in all matters of importance, appeal be made to Rome.

At the Council of Florence in 1439 the superiority of the pope over any general council was definitely promulgated, and it has never since been challenged by any council.

In the Vatican Council of 1870, in spite of strong protest, not only was the absolute authority of popes over councils confirmed, but the new doctrine of papal infallibility was ratified, rendering it superfluous for a general council ever to be summoned again.

So we have traced on the pages of history the process by which the Church of Rome of Paul's day developed, nay—for all her wealth and power and worldly glory—degenerated into the Roman Catholic Church of today, the very negation of God's thought for the holy catholic church revealed in the New Testament.

We are reminded of our Lord's parable of the mustard seed:

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof (Matthew 13:31-32).

Many and evil are the birds of the air which have lodged in the spreading branches of this herb-become-tree Church of Rome.

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