

The Doctrine of the Church In These Times

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Chapter 2

THE CHURCH DESCRIBED

"The visible Church is the Church in so far as it enshrines the invisible. Hence the ground of its unity is not to be found in its maintenance of a common order of ministry or profession of a common form of creed, but in its being the locus of that faith-relationship to GOD which constitutes its invisible essence. References to the Church universal include all Christian bodies of which this is true, and exclude those of which it is not." Leonard Hodgson (*The Nature of the Church*, Edited by R. N. Flew, p. 289)

"The Church . . . the whole number of spiritual regenerate believers, constituting '**the body of Christ**' in this world, expounded particularly in Ephesians. This Church, for Baptists, is not, and cannot be, ecclesiastically organized; and it has no local seat nor any administrative human head or headship." W. O. Carver (*The Nature of The Church*, Edited by R. N. Flew, p. 289)

The nature of the Church is not primarily defined by a particular name, a particular creed, a form of organization, a doctrine of ordination or any view of ecclesiastical authority. This does not mean that these things are unimportant, but it does mean that in themselves, they may or may not define a true Church. The nature of the Church is set forth in the Scriptures under various figures.

1. The Church is a building.

This does not refer to the edifice in which the congregation meets, for the apostolic Churches had no edifices to which the name of Church was attached. The Church is regarded as a structure and several aspects of truth are set forth under this figure.

CHRIST used this figure and said, "Upon this rock I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:18).

Paul uses this figure a number of times. "**Ye are God's building**" (I Corinthians 3:9). In Ephesians 2:20-22 we find this description of the Church: "**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 an habitation of God through the Spirit.**"

Peter makes use of the same figure, saying, "**Ye also, as lively stones, built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus**

Christ" (I Peter 2:5). The Church is a spiritual temple in which all believers are priests unto GOD, and they are to offer spiritual sacrifices to GOD.

The apostles indicate that JESUS CHRIST, as the Foundation and Corner Stone, is essential to the structure of the building and any successful attempt to disprove His deity, destroy His integrity or question His teachings would fatally impair the soundness of the structure. This has happened many times in Christendom, producing false Churches. The stones of the building are individual Christians, each in his place and each contributing to the strength and the beauty of the structure. These stones are not to consider themselves autonomous, or "Church tramps" but they are to be part of the structure, the living temple, members of a "true" Church of CHRIST. The Church building in the New Testament is built of believers, not bricks.

2. The Church is a body - the body of CHRIST.

"And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the Church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (Ephesians 1:22, 23).

"And he is the head of the body, the Church" (Colossians 1:18). **"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 12:4, 5). **"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body"** (I Corinthians 12:13). There are a number of distinctive truths here which give us a full picture of what is involved in the phrase, **"body of Christ."**

(a) CHRIST is the Head of the Body, the Church. **"The head, even Christ"** (Ephesians 4:15). **"Christ is the head of the Church"** (Ephesians 5:23). CHRIST is called the Head of the body - He is the very center of its organic life and growth. The whole concept of the Church, of its life and ministry, membership and destiny, is linked to the Person of Christ, without whom there is no Church. The final authority over any Church is JESUS CHRIST, and all authorities which conflict with this authority must be rejected. ***This means that no human being, or organization of human beings, can become the head and authority over a Church of CHRIST.*** What a sweeping judgment upon the conflicting loyalties, the rival leaders and the apostasies of Christendom!

(b) The HOLY SPIRIT is the life of the body, proceeding from both the Father and the Son. W. H. Griffith-Thomas says, "There are at least twelve references to His Divine grace and work in relation to the body of Christ. From the moment of conversion He is everything to the individual Christian and to the whole Church.

It is the Spirit who seals the believer as belonging to CHRIST (Ephesians 1:13; 4:30). By the Spirit we are:

- introduced to the Father (Ephesians 2:18).
- We are indwelt by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22).
- We are taught by the Spirit (Ephesians 3:5).
- The Spirit is the secret of inward strength (Ephesians 3:16),
- of outward unity (Ephesians 4:3),
- of inward sensitiveness (Ephesians 4:30),

- and of spiritual fullness (Ephesians 5:18).

The Word of GOD is described as '**the sword of the Spirit**' (Ephesians 6:17, and prayer is to be offered '**in the Spirit**' (Ephesians 6:18).

Thus, in every way, whether we think of the individual or the community, the Spirit of GOD actuates all." (*The Spirit of GOD*, pp. 174,175) The Church without the HOLY SPIRIT, is a body without life. A religious body, apart from the HOLY SPIRIT, is not a Church. A Church which has disobeyed the Word of GOD, grieved the Spirit of GOD, and questioned the deity of the Son of GOD is a false Church undwelt by the Spirit of GOD.

(c) The body of CHRIST is a unified diversity (I Corinthians 12:12, 27; Romans 12:5). A body has many members and these have different functions. Yet it needs them all if it is to be truly a body. A body is a whole which needs all its differing parts. Unless there is unity in this diversity, there is no co-ordination and all is confusion and schism. In the New Testament we find a wide variety of persons, gifts, functions, but one Head, one faith.

Here is the integration produced by the Spirit of GOD, not the religious synthesis produced by the blending of differences on a minimal doctrinal basis such as the present ecumenical movements and many of the great denominations. In the body of CHRIST there is diversity, but it is a unified diversity controlled and dominated by the Spirit of GOD under the Lordship of CHRIST.

3. The Church is a bride.

This concept of the Church has a strong Old Testament background.

- Hosea represents GOD as saying to his people Israel: "**And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and, thou shalt know the LORD**" (Hosea 2:19, 20).

- Isaiah says, "**For thy Maker is thine husband: the LORD of hosts is his name**" (Isaiah 54:5).

- Jeremiah 3:14 says, "**Turn, O backsliding children, saith the LORD; for I am married unto you.**"

Modern theologians have little to say about the Church, the bride of Christ, in spite of the rich biblical teachings concerning the mystical relationship between the Lord and His people, revealed in both the Old and New Testaments. Rejecting the marriage of the Lamb to His bride at His second coming, they have little use for the figure of speech so rich in spiritual significance, and so rebuking to the modern Church guilty of spiritual adultery with other lovers.

The classical passage in the New Testament is found in, Ephesians 5:25-32: "**Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also 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. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hateth his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the Church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church."

This union is not only a mystical union, it is a holy union, requiring from the Church a character corresponding to this holy relationship. Here is required the highest fidelity to Christ, the deepest loyalty, the most transcendent love, so unlike the Churches today.

The spiritual marriage between CHRIST and His Church will be consummated when He comes in glory and gathers His true people to Himself. **"Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. . . . And he said unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb"** (Revelation 19:7,9).

All these metaphors imply the spiritual unity of the Church, but that of the temple suggests its dignity and sanctity, that of the body its co-operation, that of the bride its purity.

Four Characteristics of the Church

1. The Church is one. **"There is one body, and one spirit"** (Ephesians 4:4). **"We, being many, are one body in Christ"** (Romans 12:5).

The unity of the Church has but one ground, that of a common union with Christ; and every reference to it makes this prominent. In John 17:21 JESUS makes this clear: **"That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."**

This is spiritual oneness, more profound and more spiritual than external organization can effect. External oneness is never alluded to beyond an individual congregation. The constant tone of apostolic doctrine points to the maintenance of a spiritual unity rather than organizational unity. Paul warns of divisions within the local congregation (I Corinthians 3). The principles upheld in the case of local congregations must of moral necessity apply to divisions between groups of GOD's people, but the remedy suggested is not federation or amalgamation.

Nowhere are Christians exhorted to maintain unity with heretics or apostates but, on the contrary, they are not to maintain unity with them. The Church is one, but it is not the oneness of the modern Church union movement, with its disregard of the fundamental teachings of the Word of GOD.

2. The Church is holy.

The holiness of the Church is an idea inherited from its predecessor, the congregation of Israel. Israel was called to be a holy nation, in the sense of separateness from idolatry and sinful

practices. The GOD of Israel was portrayed as the Holy One (Isaiah 6). Places where GOD revealed Himself became holy ground and all the elements of worship in Israel were said to be holy. The prophets, and the apostles after them, labored to impress upon Israel and the Church the conviction that God wants holy people. Local assemblies of believers are to express in their lives and conduct that holiness which God expects in His people and provides for through His Spirit.

J. C. Ryle (*Holiness*, p. 217) describes the Church in these words: "The Church of our text (Matthew 16:18) is made up of all true believers in the Lord JESUS CHRIST, of all who are really holy and converted people.

- It comprehends all who have repented of sin, and fled to CHRIST by faith, and have been made new creatures in Him.

- It comprises all GOD's elect, all who have received GOD's grace, all who have been washed in CHRIST's blood, all who have been clothed in CHRIST's righteousness, all who have been born again and sanctified by Christ's Spirit.

All such, of every name, and rank, and nation, and people, and tongue, compose the Church of our text. This is the body of CHRIST. This is the flock of CHRIST. This is the bride. This is the Lamb's wife."

Needless to say Ryle is describing a holy Church, not the religious organizations that often go by the name of a Church. A true Church is a holy Church. By appropriate disciplines it will endeavor to maintain both holiness of life and purity of doctrine.

The necessity for a holy Church does not arise entirely from the demands of GOD, but also upon holiness as a necessity for the tasks assigned to the Churches. The history of the Church indicates that the holiness of the Church is the best means of convincing a sinful world of its divine character and the best credentials for its message. The ability to produce saintly people is a prime necessity in our world. If the Church is to be accepted as holy, it must be holy. True New Testament Churches will have this distinguishing mark. If this mark is absent, there is no authenticity in name, organization, creed, or historical succession.

3. The Church is apostolic.

E. T. Hiscox (*The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, pp. 33, 34) says, "It is the claim of the Roman, and of some other prelatical and High-Church communions, that they have an unbroken succession of ministerial gifts and ordinations direct from the apostles - what is sometimes termed 'the historical episcopate.' And if a succession in the ministry, then a succession largely in Church order, and sacramental efficacy. This claim is historically groundless, and doctrinally useless. But the true apostolicity consists not in succession but in possession, for they who possess and exhibit the doctrines, the spirit and life of the Apostles, have right to claim this mark of a true gospel Church." We are told that the early Church "**continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers**" (Acts 2:42).

W. H. Griffith-Thomas (*The Spirit of GOD*) states the true substance of apostolicity when he says, "The Church received the Scriptures from the Lord JESUS CHRIST by the HOLY SPIRIT through His apostles and prophets, and now the function of the Church is to witness to the fact that these are the Scriptures of the apostles and prophets which she has received and of which she is also the keeper and their preserver through the ages for the use by the people of GOD." Again, he says, "We believe that the Church is apostolic, because it is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The succession is that of truth, and the Church founded by the apostles is still guided by them in their writings as found in the New Testament. So that any apostolic succession cannot be personal, because as apostles the men were unique and had no successors. But there can be apostolic succession by adherence to doctrine and life." (p. 261)

Adreas Rinkel says, "The Church of CHRIST is apostolic that is to say, she preaches through the ages the same gospel, fills the same functions and administers the same sacraments, as in the days of the apostles." (*The Nature of the Church*, Edited by R. N. Flew, p. 151) "The Church is supposed to teach, not the clever guesses of its pastors or the messages demanded by a half-converted laity, but the truth as it is in JESUS, the truth about GOD and man which He taught to the apostles . . . That faith the Church must hold if it is to be effective. It is the thing the apostles taught, and they were taught by JESUS CHRIST Himself.

Some sections of CHRIST's Church have veered away from it. They thereby become ineffective to win the man in the street, just as all Christian groups in days past which have forsaken it have lost their hold on seeking people. Every sort of misstatement, half-statement, and warping of the faith has been seen from time to time during the nineteen centuries of Christendom . . . The Churches today which fail to teach it are lapsing into vague generalities which mean little." Bernard Iddings Bell (*Religion for Living*, pp. 89, 91).

If apostolicity is a mark of the true Church, then the liberal Churches of our day which have departed from, or denied the apostles' doctrines, are not New Testament Churches and should not be recognized as such. The old doctrine of apostolic succession should be dusted off, given a scriptural interpretation, and Churches which have departed from this succession of doctrine and life should be disfellowshipped. The Church is apostolic, and local assemblies which are not apostolic in doctrine and life are not true Churches.

4. The Church is universal.

Unlike the Jewish religious community, and unlike religions which are definitely racial or national, the true Church is universal in its membership, doctrines and objectives. It has no race, nationality or color barriers. Its truths are of universal value, because they are derived from the one true God. They are capable of universal application, hindered not by their limitations, but by sinful man's unwillingness to accept and practice them. The Church by its nature is and must be universal if it is to meet the need of the whole world.

Thiessen (*Lectures in Systematic Theology*, p. 407) says, "In the universal sense the Church consists of all those who, in this dispensation, have been born of the Spirit of GOD and have by that same Spirit been baptized into the body of CHRIST" (I Peter 1:3, 22-25; I Corinthians 12:13). The universal Church is a conception of the mind, having no real existence in time or place, and not a historical fact-without organization, without action, without corporate being, and without any human head or government. The universal Church has never had a business meeting,

nor issued any pronouncements, or encyclicals. The Church is universal, but there is no universal Church.

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