

## Part VI: The Doctrine of the Church and the Means of Grace

### Chapter XXIII: The Nature of the Church

#### 1. General Description of the Church

The principal Old Testament word for Church is derived from a verb meaning 'to call' and the principal New Testament word, from a verb meaning 'to call out'. Both denote the Church as an assembly called by God.

a. Different meanings of the word in the New Testament. Most generally it denotes a local church, whether assembled for worship or not,

Acts 5:11; "And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all that heard these things."

Acts 11:26; "and when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that even for a whole year they were gathered together with the church, and taught much people, and that the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch."

Rom. 16:4; "who for my life laid down their own necks; unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles:"

1 Cor. 11:18; "For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and I partly believe it."

1 Cor. 16:1. "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I gave order to the churches of Galatia, so also do ye."

Sometimes it designates a domestic church, or "the church in the house" of some individual,

Rom. 16:5, 23; "and [salute] the church that is in their house. Salute Epaphroditus my beloved, who is the first-fruits of Asia unto Christ. ... Gaius my host, and of the whole church, salutes you. Erastus the treasurer of the city salutes you, and Quartus the brother."

1 Cor. 16:19 "The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Prisca salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house."

Col 4:15. "Salute the brethren that are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church that is in their house."

In its most comprehensive sense it is a description of the whole body of believers, whether in heaven or on earth,

Eph. 1:22; "and he put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church,"

Eph. 3:10,21; "to the intent that now unto the principalities and the powers in the heavenly [places] might be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God, ... unto him [be] the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever. Amen."

Eph. 5:23; "For the husband is the head of the wife, and Christ also is the head of the church, [being] himself the savior of the body."

Col. 1:18,24. "18 And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. 24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church;"

b. The essence of the church. Roman Catholics and Protestants differ as to the essential nature of the Church. The former finds this in the Church as an external and visible organization, consisting primarily of the priest together with the higher orders of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the Pope. Protestants broke with this external conception and seek the essence of the Church in the invisible and spiritual communion of the saints. The Church in its essential nature includes the believers of all ages and no one else. It is the spiritual body of Jesus Christ, in which there is no place for unbelievers.

c. Distinctions applied to the church. In speaking of the Church in general several distinctions come into consideration.

(1) The church militant and the church triumphant. The Church as she now exists on earth is a militant Church, that is called unto and is actually engaged in a holy war. The Church in heaven on the other hand is the triumphant Church, in which the sword is exchanged for the palm of victory.

(2) The visible and the invisible church. This distinction applies to the Church as it exists on earth, which is invisible as far as her spiritual nature is concerned, so that it is impossible to determine precisely who do and who do not belong to her, but becomes visible in the profession and conduct of its members, in the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments, and in her external organization and government.

(3) The church as an organism and as an institution. This distinction applies only to the visible Church. As an organism it is visible in the communal life of believers and in their opposition to the world, and as an organization, in the offices, the administration of the Word and the Sacraments, and in a certain form of Church government.

d. Definitions of the church. The invisible Church may be defined as the company of the elect who are called by the Spirit of God, or simply, as the communion of believers. And the visible Church may be defined as the community of those who profess the true faith together with their children. It should be noticed that the membership in both is not altogether alike.

## **2. The Attributes and Marks of the Church**

There are especially three attributes of the Church, and also three marks or external characteristics.

a. Its attributes. These are the following three:

(1) Its unity. According to the Roman Catholics this is the unity of an imposing world-wide organization, but according to the Protestants, the unity of the spiritual body of Jesus Christ.

(2) Its holiness. Roman Catholics find this in the holiness of its dogmas, its moral precepts, its worship, and its discipline; but Protestants locate it in the members of the Church as holy in Christ and as holy in principle, in the possession of the new life, which is destined for perfect holiness.

(3) Its catholicity. Rome lays special claim to this, because its Church is scattered over the whole earth and has a greater number of members than all the sects taken together. Protestants claim that the invisible Church is the real catholic Church, because it includes all believers of all ages and all lands.

b. Its marks or external characteristics. While the attributes belong primarily to the invisible Church, the marks belong to the visible Church, and serve to distinguish the true from the false. These are also three in number:

(1) The true preaching of the Word of God. This is the most important mark of the Church, 1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 9. It does not mean that the preaching must be perfect and absolutely pure, but that it must be true to the fundamentals of the Christian religion, and must have a controlling influence on faith and practice.

“<sup>1</sup> Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup> Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that confesses not Jesus is not of God: and this is the [spirit] of the antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it cometh; and now it is in the world already. (1 John 4:1-3)”

“Whosoever goeth onward and abides not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abides in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. (2 John 1:9)”

(2) The right administration of the sacraments. The sacraments may not be divorced from the Word, as in the Roman Catholic Church, and should be administered by lawful ministers, in accordance with the divine institution, and only to believers and their seed,

Matt. 28:19; “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit:”

Mark 16:16; “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved; but he that does not believe shall be condemned.”

Acts 2:42; “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

1 Cor. 11:23-30.

(3) The faithful exercise of discipline. This is necessary for maintaining purity of doctrine and safeguarding the holiness of the sacraments. The Word of God insists on this,

Matt. 18:18; “Verily I say unto you, what things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

1 Cor. 5:1-5, 13; “1 It is actually reported that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not even among the Gentiles, that one [of you] hath his father’s wife. 2 And ye are puffed up, and did not rather mourn, that he that had done this deed might be taken away from among you. 3 For I verily, being absent in body but present in spirit, have already as though I were present judged him that hath so wrought this thing, 4 in the name of our Lord Jesus, ye being gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. ... But them that are without God judges. Put away the wicked man from among yourselves.

1 Corinthians 14:33, 39-40; “<sup>33</sup> for God is not [a God] of confusion, but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints,... <sup>39</sup> Wherefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. <sup>40</sup> But let all things be done decently and in order.”

### **To Memorize. Passages testifying to:**

a. The unity of the church:

John 10:16. "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock, one shepherd."

John 17:20-21. "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me."

Ephesians 4:4-6. "4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all."

b. The holiness of the church:

Exodus 19:6. "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."

1 Peter 2:9. "But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

c. The catholicity of the church:

Psalms 2:8. "Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, And the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession."

Revelation 7:9. "After these things I saw, and behold, a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands."

d. The necessity of adhering to the truth:

2 Timothy 1:13. "Hold the pattern of sound words which thou hast heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus."

2 Timothy 2:15. "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth."

Titus 2:1. "But speak thou the things which befit the sound doctrine."

e. The necessity of the right administration of the sacraments:

Acts 19:4-5. "And Paul said, John baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people that they should believe on him that should come after him, that is, on Jesus. And when they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus."

1 Corinthians 11:28-30. "But let a man prove himself, and so let him eat of the bread, and drink of the cup. For he that eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment unto himself, if he discern not the body. For this cause many among you are weak and sickly, and not a few sleep."

f. The necessity of discipline:

Matthew 16:19. "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Titus 3:10-11. "A factious man after a first and second admonition refuse; knowing that such a one is perverted, and sins, being self-condemned."

### **For Further Study:**

a. Did the Church exist before the day of Pentecost?

Cf. Matthew 18:17; "And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican."

Acts 7:38. "This is he that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel that spake to him in the Mount Sinai, and with our fathers: who received living oracles to give unto us:"

b. Is the word 'church' ever used in the singular in the New Testament to denote a group of churches?

Cf. Acts 9:31. "So the church throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had peace, being edified; and, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, was multiplied."

c. What causes for discipline were there in the Corinthian church? 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 13; 11:17-34; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

### **Questions for Review:**

1. What is the meaning of the word 'church' in Scripture according to its derivation?
2. What different meanings has the word in the New Testament?
3. How do Roman Catholics and Protestants differ as to the essence of the Church?
4. What is the difference between the militant and the triumphant Church?
5. To what Church does the distinction 'visible and invisible' apply?
6. In what sense is the Church called invisible?
7. How does the Church as an organism and as an institution differ?
8. How can we define the invisible, and how the visible Church?
9. Which are the attributes of the Church, and how does our conception of them differ from that of the Catholics?
10. Which are the marks of the Church, and what purpose do they serve?
11. Do they belong to the invisible or to the visible Church?
12. How must we conceive of the true preaching of the Word?
13. What belongs to the right administration of the sacraments?
14. Why is discipline necessary?