"DEFINING ECCLESIOLOGY"

by

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Part 6: Chapter 2

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I. Church Is a Doctrine.

The historic creeds of the undivided ancient church, accepted by almost all Christians to the present hour, demonstrate that there is a common, consensual core of beliefs among all Christians, always and everywhere. One of the earliest references to doctrinal consensus (by Cyprian of Carthage, AD 250) says, 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life through the holy church.[1] The 'Apostles' Creed' adds 'catholic' to the formula and the 'Nicene Creed' (325, 381) adds 'one,' *viz.*: 'one holy, catholic and apostolic church.'[2] Church, therefore, is as much a *bona fide* doctrine of historic Christianity as the doctrine of the holy Trinity or the incarnation.

II. Marks of the Church.

Not every group of believers is aware of this early and enduring consensus, but wherever Christians do become aware they will likely agree there is a church of which they are a part and that there is only *one* church, in some important sense: *holy,* as distinct from the world; *catholic,* as including true believers everywhere of every age from the apostles onward; and *apostolic*, in the sense of founded by apostles and as faithfully teaching and living out apostolic doctrines. Much more than this is of course affirmed and with varying emphasis and understandings.

These 'notes' or marks of the church are not empirically derived nor are they immediately observable in local churches. The marks themselves have to be defined rather carefully. We need to be reminded that though revelation gives us much information about the church, she is at least partly under the category of mystery in the Bible (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:9; 3:3-9; 5:32). Paul once connects the church with the revealed mystery of the incarnation (1 Tim. 3:14-16). In Revelation 1-3 the churches are seven lamps with Christ in their midst, whose 'angels' are in Christ's right hand (Rev. 1:12, 13, 20).

The church and its marks, however, may be discerned by biblically informed and spiritually sensitive people in thousands of assemblies where believers around the world gather every week. Where there is no *unity* with Christ and other Christians there is only *schism*; where no *holiness,* only *sham religion*; where no *catholic* faith, *apostasy*; where not *apostolic,* then *unscriptural*. Lacking any discernible connection with the church of Scripture and history and

1 Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* II (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1966), pp. 20, 55.

2 Ibid., p. 59.

propagating teachings contrary to apostolic Scripture it cannot be a church of Christ. If any of the marks is obscured or missing, the assembly needs reformation (in the sixteenth-century sense of revival and restoration). This is precisely why the leaders of the Reformation at first labored to revive and restore the medieval church to its beginnings in the apostolic *ekklesia*. Prevented from that, they set out sadly to find living space in Europe for evangelical churches. The results are well known.

In point of fact, as Emil Brunner correctly states:

There are three classical 'definitions' of the church, each of which contains an answer to the question about the basis of the church. The church is the Company of the Elect, the Body of Christ, the Communion of Saints (*coetus electorum, corpus Christi, communio sanctorum*).[3]

These of course are Christian 'definitions,' though not comprehensive, scientific or sociological definitions. Each implies the church is a peculiar (particular) people different from all others. They are 'the company of the elect' because only they (not the entire world) are chosen in Christ and Christ is God's elect; they are 'the communion of saints' because God has declared them so and are a communion even though scattered abroad (as Peter says, 1 Peter 1:1, 2). 'The body of Christ' is a metaphor employed particularly by Paul with special reference to its being the functionary of Christ as Savior of mankind. Yet each 'definition' (or perhaps only characterization or designation) includes those who have been 'graduated' to heaven -- and as 'the company of the elect' some yet unborn. These concepts have been incorporated into very precious hymns, as in Samuel Stone's *The Church's One Foundation:*

Yet she on earth hath union
With God the three in one
And mystic sweet communion
With those whose rest is won.

Calvin conferred importance on 'the communion of saints.' He points out, 'this clause, though generally omitted by the ancients, ought not to be overlooked, for it very well expresses *what the church is*' (emphasis added).[4]

III. Marks Do Not Define the Church As Such.

It is a mistake, I think, to suppose that the church may be defined simply by discussing her unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. What is this church which wherever present possesses those characteristics? The critical questions remain to be answered.

Having said this, is it true that 'the adjectives "one holy, catholic, apostolic" are terms specific enough to describe the essential nature of the church'?[5] Hardly. It is a bit like saying of the place where I live, that it is made of bricks, glass, wood and steel without specifying further

3 Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation, Dogmatics:* Vol. III, trans. D. Cairnes and T. H. L. Parker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, English Trans. 1962), pp. 22, 23.
4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* IV, trans. F. L. Battler (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 3.
5 R. L. Omanson, 'The Church,' *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker), p. 233.

that it is a house not a barn, a residential structure not a warehouse, and so on. The definition says nothing of how the church is distinct from a club or a mob, or what it is in which the four marks inhere. These four adjectives designate *differentia* but no *major genus*.

Perhaps it is better to say these 'notes' or 'properties' are means by which, whatever the nature of the one society of Christ may be, it [the church] may be recognized by these marks [unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity]. The Roman Catholic Church does not understand the notes (marks, properties) as Protestant evangelicals do, but she has it right as to what they are and what they do: 'conspicuous characteristics which distinguish it from all other bodies and prove it to be the one society of Jesus Christ.'[6] They indicate essential features.'[7] Rome thinks that she alone possesses these features authentically, hence, only as a matter of courtesy, not of fact, calls other Christian groups churches. Such added 'marks' or 'notes' as invisibility and exercise of discipline came into use as marks by the Reformers of the sixteenth century. Therefore, useful as the notes are in discussing the church, we must have many more categories. This does not mean that a theologian may not arrange further *sub loci* of ecclesiology under the four notes and proceed with comprehensive treatment as does Thomas Oden.[8] The Roman Church at the Council of Constance (1414-1418) specifically condemned John Wycliffe's 'error' of saying that the church is an article of faith only if by *church* is meant the gathering of the elect.[9]

An illustrative example will help to clarify the point that the four notes of unity, holiness, apostolicity and catholicity do not define what the church is. Water is a clear, odorless liquid which freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, vaporizes at 212 degrees Fahrenheit (at sea level) and in a vertical column 32 feet tall equals the weight of earth's atmosphere. These are the *properties* of water. A property is 'any trait or attribute proper to a thing . . . any of the principal characteristics of a substance.'[10] Note all of them in the case of water are directly observable to the senses without chemical analysis. Yet by chemical analysis we discover that each water molecule is composed of two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen. The compound H_2O is not similar to either hydrogen or oxygen. We might even try to define water by how it may be used -- to wash or cook with, to swim in, to navigate the whole earth, to sustain life by drinking it, and similar. An adequate definition of water turns out to be quite a difficult matter, yet any animal or man recognizes it quickly (in pure form) when he drinks it or dips a part of his body in it. Whether we define water by properties or chemical analysis or what it does or can do, defining its identity is no simple matter.

This study from this point onward is entirely in response to that question: What is the church -- both what it is and what it ought to be, its *esse* and its *bene esse*? We shall consider first the words *church* and *ekklesia* -- the New Testament Greek word which it invariably translates. After introducing several distinct but related ideas, *the Kingdom of God* and Israel (and metaphors and synonyms), then the two main aspects of the subject, the church *universal* and the church *local,* are to be introduced and explained. The treatment then moves on to nine

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6 A. J. Schulte, 'Church,' *The Catholic Encyclopedia,* III, p. 758.
7 *The Catechism of 1994*, p. 811.
8 Thomas Oden, 'Life in the Spirit,' *Systematic Theology,* III (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992, 1996).
9 *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation,* ed. by Gerald Van Ackeren (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1973). p. 77.
10 Webster's *New World Dictionary,* 3rd ed.

topics related to the church universal: its foundation, establishment, relation to Israel and the kingdom of God, essential nature and the like, unity, gifts, mission, purposes, and destiny. After that the church local will be discussed: its nature, organization and government, offices, ordinances, and worship.[11]

It was my original plan to treat modern church union (ecumenical) movements but that would have enlarged this volume beyond reasonable size. It was that movement among 'foreign' mission fields in the nineteenth century that sparked intense interest in the nature of the church and a growing awareness of the importance of defining and clarifying every aspect of the subject. Soon there were journals wholly dedicated to research and discussion of narrowly defined aspects of the church and countless books, monographs, pamphlets and sermons. A special vocabulary was created to discuss the subject -- for which the comprehensive term is ecumenism. Whatever one thinks of it -- for good or ill -- the ecumenical movement cannot yet be counted out.

IV. The Church Both an Aspect of and a Doctrine of Christianity.

The church of Christ is both an aspect of and a doctrine of Christianity. Christianity is sometimes thought to be the same entity as 'the church.' A different and better way of looking at the matter is to see Christianity as (1) the culmination of a *history of redemption* in the life and work of Jesus Christ who, as the creed says, was born of a virgin, lived, died, was resurrected and ascended to heaven, and so forth. Christianity is also (2) a *system of doctrines* by which the Holy Scriptures and its expositors through the centuries interpret that redemptive history. The *church* is one of those doctrines. The church is also (3) *the multitudes of people* who have embraced the redemption in history and now live out their faith on earth and in heaven. And it is correct to say the church is (4) a society, the *institutional expression* of the redemption, the doctrines and of the people. It has a visible aspect which has had an ongoing history that people who are not even part of it, or who even reject it, can recognize at least in part. This study will ignore none of these four features of 'the church' but will focus on the second -- the church as a doctrine of Christianity.

V. How to Approach Definition and Description of the Church.

Depending on presuppositions and goals, one of three different approaches -- with modifications and crossovers -- may be followed. Every group claiming to be a Christian church (or *the* Christian church) acknowledges Jesus Christ as founder of the church and that the church of Jesus Christ has some unique, vital connection with Him. Any 'church' which is orthodox in any meaningful sense finds in the New Testament its authority for doctrine and practice, but some do not regard the New Testament as the only authority. Some regard their structure as identically continuous with the church of the apostles, some acknowledge themselves as discontinuous and claim only to restore the essential features of the apostolic church.

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11 In another book I have discussed the relations of the church to civil governments ('church and state'), to society and to civilization, to sects and denominations of Christians. See R. D. Culver, *Civil Government, A Biblical View* (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, 2000).

Let us cite first the Roman Catholic approach. Though I simplify somewhat, the Roman Church claims that its visible organizational structure as such is the church. The esse of the church inheres in the structure. Let J. L. McKenzie, an eminent post-Vatican II Roman theologian, state the matter:

> In Roman Catholic belief, the hierarchical structure of the church is the bearer of the sacred power which Jesus Christ committed to that group of his disciples who are called apostles. . . . Just as no one but Jesus could confer this authority on the apostles, so no one but the apostles could transmit the authority to successors.[12]

McKenzie goes on to point out that this apostolic authority primarily includes the 'sacred power of the priesthood' or 'the power of orders' to administer the means of saving grace, the sacraments, and secondly, 'the power to rule' or 'jurisdiction.' As we observed in chapter 1 of this section these powers as thought to be discovered in Scripture, in tradition and traced through history to the present, are essentially the doctrine of the church.

At the opposite end of the scale are 'Pilgrim church' theories. They see the 'visible' or historic churches of Christendom as discontinuous with the apostolic church. They agree with McKenzie that the Roman aspect of the church began approximately with the conversion of Emperor Constantine but think of the 'true church' as a 'Pilgrim church' whose written history of faithfulness to apostolic, New Testament origins is largely lost from written documents. Roman (and Eastern Orthodox Christianity as well) are both *formally* apostate, though Christians were and are present in both.

A passage from a fine book by a convinced 'Christian Brethren' author tells in graphic, but not extreme, form how this approach to ecclesiology works.

> One day I resolutely put aside all my books, I took my New Testament and there underlined all that concerned the church; then I picked out and classified on cards what I had found. What a joy it was to see roughly outlined and gradually taking shape a living picture of the primitive church . . . the church according to the plan of God.[13]

Mr. Kuen goes on to acknowledge enlightenment (influence?) from other churchmen and scholarly Christian sources, but insists on the validity and adequacy of what he found by inductive study of the Bible -- the primitive apostolic church, still today the true church -- though he does not attempt definition.[14]

The Roman Church acknowledges an invisible church of the 'elect' within the visible church of the hierarchy but both are aspects of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of which the Roman is the true and only structure, complete with the pope, who is Christ's vicar on earth.

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12 J. L. McKenzie, *The Roman Catholic Church* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1971), pp. 22, 23.

13 A. F. Kuen, *I Will Build My Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), p. 12. Mr. Kuen, a professor at a State Teachers College in France, was trained in theology at a Plymouth Brethren school in Switzerland.

14 Ibid., p. 11.

For the Pilgrim church theologian, the hierarchy represents the apostate church.

In between these approaches fall the several efforts at definition and restoration of the authentic first-century church as set up by Christ and His Apostles attempted by Protestant Reformers on the continent and Anglicans and Puritans in Britain.

All the Reformers at first seem to have seen enough of New Testament authenticity in the Roman Church to regard it as still a church and as reformable (i.e. capable of being restored). They brought the 'Scripture only' principle to bear on their ideas of the church. And, since a visible church, however rudimentarily structured, involved practice (assembling, preaching, presbyters, baptisms, the Lord's Supper and much more), they were compelled to decide what was authentically apostolic and what was not. This quickly drew the attention of the Roman hierarchy who then drove the aspirant Reformers out of the medieval church. The Reformers were committed to historic orthodoxy and biblical authority; hence they were driven to weigh what they found in the Roman Church of the time against Scripture and, finding it wanting, they endeavored to construct something authentically apostolic.

As in the whole range of doctrine, the Reformers did not attempt to erase 1,500 years of church history and theology in constructing ecclesiology. They were not able quite to break free from the cloying influence of the state-church notion -- or, better stated, the territorial church. They did not cut free from the wholeness of post-Constantinian Christendom wherein there was no room for the Christian *ekklesia* as simply a voluntary association. For them baptism in infancy remained the door of entrance both to church and civil commonwealth.

Yet Zwingli and Luther at the beginning, followed shortly by Calvin, all sought to find in the Scriptures a doctrine of the church. Brunner observes,

> The [Roman] Catholic doctrine of Baptism . . . is unambiguously sacramental; salvation is imparted in an event which makes no personal claim on the man, which works automatically and mechanically, *ex opere operato*. . . . it remains a matter of indifference whether it is an infant who is baptized or a man capable of answering the word in faith. . . . Luther's new knowledge of the personal character of faith as trust in the grace offered in Jesus Christ was bound to crack this whole sacramental structure.[15]

For present purposes it will not be necessary to report in detail how Luther came to conclusions similar to modern 'free church' doctrine of the church but receded from them. Similarly Zwingli found that his own principles of *sola scriptura,* taken seriously by 'the radicals,' i.e. the Anabaptists of Zurich, led to a church of voluntary associates, and the leaders of Zurich were not prepared to break with the territorial (or Constantinian) principle and later joined others in formation of territorial churches throughout Switzerland. This system was already established in Switzerland when Calvin came to Geneva in 1536.

Yet all the Reformers agreed that the pattern of the visible assemblies of the Christian *ekklesia,* like all doctrine and practice of Christianity, should be derived from Scripture only. Further,

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15 Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics,* III (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952), pp. 52, 55.

they agreed that historical patterns should be corrected by Scripture. They aimed to judge the 'fathers' by the Scriptures, not the other way around.

The rise of the modern ecumenical movement produced a torrent of literature on this subject. We shall attend to some of it later in two chapters on the nature of the local church and of the universal church.

VI. Ecclesiology Addresses the 'Visible' Church.

The churches as they exist on earth have many flaws. Yet, the New Testament addresses these assemblies as churches -- even 'the churches of Galatia' which Paul knew to have removed from grace to another gospel (Gal. 1:1-6) and the 'seven churches' of the province of Asia, one of which was about to be spewed out of the Lord's mouth (Rev. 2, 3). The *ekklesia* at Ephesus (where Timothy ministered, in Paul's absence, with other elders and deacons) the Apostle declared to be 'the house of God.' This was not because God's residence is there as it is in the Tabernacle and first temple, but because the *ekklesia* assembled is where the Word is preached, where by the foolishness of a preached message God has chosen to save, and where Christian worship takes place, without which true Christian nurture cannot be normal. The visible, professing church is not only 'the house of God' but also 'the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth' (1 Tim. 3:15 KJV). For this reason believers must not forsake the practice or neglect 'to meet together' (Heb. 10:25), where they must also 'See that you [they] do not refuse him who is speaking' (Heb. 12:25).

We know very little about 'the church triumphant' of the present and future in heaven. Hebrews 12:22-24 says there is an 'assembly of the firstborn' in heaven, called 'Mount Zion and . . . the city of the living God' where also are 'innumerable angels in festal gathering . . . God, the judge of all,' other 'spirits of the righteous made perfect' and 'Jesus, the mediator.' The passage furnishes a field day for commentators. What is plain and relevant here is that the bulk of the New Testament is addressed to believers on earth, most of it in their capacity as members of local churches. Further, the 'churches' and 'church' of Matthew 16 and 18, the Acts, and on through Revelation is the church on earth as it exists visibly. There is validity to distinctions between church visible and invisible, but the distinction does not mean the same to every theologian who employs it.

VII. Ecclesiology Is a Big Subject.

This church, Galatians 3:20 notwithstanding, is the mother who on earth has mediated motherhood for us all for all our lives from first spiritual awakening to the end of life.

Paul, in a passage (Gal. 4:21-31) where he is speaking somewhat in the oriental mode of undefined but understood metaphor, says: 'But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother' (Gal. 4:26). The Roman church thinks the idea of 'mother church' refers to the papal edifice. I recommend Calvin's exposition:

The Jerusalem which is *above,* or heavenly, is not contained in heaven, nor are we to seek for

it out of this world; for the church is spread out over the whole world, and is a 'stranger and pilgrim on the earth' (Heb. 11:13). Why then is it said to be from heaven? Because it originates in heavenly grace; for the sons of God are born . . . by the power of the Holy Spirit. The heavenly Jerusalem, which derives from heaven, and dwells above by faith (Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1-4) is the mother of believers. To the church, under God, we owe it that we are 'born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible' (1 Peter 1:23), and from her we obtain the milk and food by which we are afterward nourished. Such are the reasons why the church is called the mother of believers. And certainly he who refuses to be a son of the church in vain desires to have God as his Father; for it is only through the instrumentality of the church that we are 'born of God' (John 3:19), and brought up through the various stages of childhood and youth, till we arrive at manhood.[16]

Calvin has much to say of this in the first chapters of Book IV of the *Institutes.* It is not without significance that Calvin, who lived at a time when 'the church' was as corrupt and divided as it ever has been, devoted 510 pages (Westminster Ed.), roughly one-third of the pages of the *Institutes,* to 'the Holy Catholic church' -- 'The External Means or Aids By Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein.'[17]

VIII. Many Sources Go Into an Adequate Ecclesiology.

The Bible does not anywhere define the church. Captions such as we have already considered -- 'company of the elect,' 'communion of saints,' 'body of Christ,' and others such as 'community of faith' and 'household of faith,' 'the new Israel,' some biblical, some not -- are only designations. The *ekklesia* is introduced by name in the Gospels only in the phrase 'I will build my church' (Jesus to Peter, Matt. 16:18) and 'tell it to the church . . . listen . . . to the church' (Matt. 18:17). We may be sure the disciples did not yet understand these predictions, though later they did (John 16:12-14). The next time we hear of *ekklesia* is at Acts 2:47 (KJV), where some time following the effusion of the Spirit it is said 'the Lord added to the church daily.' The church is, of course, the group of 120 plus about 3,000 (Acts 1:15; 2:41). It was something new, formed supernaturally into a unique entity on the Day of Pentecost. In Matthew 16 and 18 it was a future entity. After Pentecost it was an existing entity. Yet no verse of Scripture tells us specifically what it was and is.

The rest of the New Testament assumes an understanding of the *ekklesia* by the readers, yet also by bits and pieces gives information on every aspect of its nature, services, mission, ministry, government and destiny. At all points therefore our studies must begin with Scripture and end with Scripture. Yet no one comes to research the Bible without previous knowledge of and experience in the church -- unless one wishes to reject one's previous Christian life along with one's mother. So though I must judge what I already know of my mother-church from living in and with her, it is not necessary for me to repudiate her. This means simply that my views of the church have been inescapably affected by my experience in the bosom of the church. Further, I am not the first to attempt the daunting task of extracting from the Bible what it has to say about Christ's church. Others have been doing so for

16 Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians,* trans. W. Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854), pp. 140, 141.

17 Calvin, *Institutes* (Westminster Ed. of 1960), pp. 1009-1524.

centuries. We may not neglect to learn from them. This 'history of exegesis' is how Jaroslav Pelikan rightly identifies tradition. Also, the church for the past century and on to the present has attracted the serious attention of many Christian scholars. Though I am not able to give credit to each from whom I have learned, this book owes a debt to each of them, for ecclesiology has been a topic of special interest to me since an article I wrote on the subject was published many years ago, and which article had much to do with my being invited to begin a career as a professor of theology.

Let us 'launch out into the deep.'