

I. ECCLESIOLOGY IS THE STUDY OF THE CHURCH (her nature, her attributes, her marks, her government and her work [the means of grace]).

A. The nature of the church

1. The church is a living organism

- a. Organic means "living." We call the church an organism to emphasize the truth that the church is one unified, living whole, possessing one spiritual life. Thus the church is not a collection of unrelated individuals; or a pile of bricks; or even a machine, but a living body, or a tree, or even a temple made up of living stones.
- b. The church's life is the life of Jesus Christ, which flows from the Head to the Body and to each individual member. The church lives out of Christ by faith through the Holy Spirit.
- c. Salvation consists in elect sinners being called out of darkness and placed into the organism of the church. Outside of the organism of the church no member has life and there is no salvation.
- d. The church's organic nature is primary; only secondarily is the church an organization. This is the opposite of Rome's conception: she sees the church as that organization in union with Peter and the pope.

2. The church is the body of Christ.

- a. The church has one head, Christ, who governs her, and is her source of life. There are not two heads, one in heaven, and one on earth (the pope, the king/queen, etc). Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18
- b. The church consists of many members. Each member is different, has his/her own place in the body, and fulfills a vital function as part of the whole. The Lord places the members, a definite, unchangeable number of members, into the body as it pleases Him. I Cor. 10:17, I Cor. 12:12-20.
- c. All the members are united spiritually to Christ, and to one another; and all grow up together into the Him (Eph. 4:4, 15-16; Col. 2:18-19).

3. The church is the bride of Christ.

- a. The church as a whole is the object of Christ's love by giving Himself for her (Eph. 5:22-24).
- b. The church is subject to Christ in all things, as the body is to the head, and the wife to the husband.
- c. The church is espoused to Christ: it is her calling to remain pure, holy & faithful to Him, as she waits for His Coming when He shall consummate the marriage (II Cor. 11:2; Rev. 21:2, 9; 19:9).

4. The church is the temple of God

- a. This figure emphasizes more the order or beauty of the church. She is not a haphazard pile of bricks with no structure, but the temple of God built on the foundation of Christ. The foundation determines the size, the shape and the overall structure of the building.
- b. But even with this figure the organic nature of the church is not denied because the members are *living* stones. I Cor. 3:16-17; II Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; I Peter 2:5; Rev. 3:12.

B. The church is that living organism chosen in Christ and gathered by Christ by His Spirit.

1. The Triune God chose Jesus Christ as the Head of the church.

- a. Therefore Christ can never be separated from His church; and the church can never be separated from Christ. The Head cannot be without the body (or even be lacking the least member of the body) and the body cannot exist without the Head.
- b. Election determines who the members of the church are. God does not choose all to be members of the body of Christ, and then leave it up to man to decide whether he wants to be part of the church or not. Then, we would have to say that part of Christ's body is forever missing; that some of the stones prepared for the temple are never used.
- c. God does not choose a multitude of unrelated individuals: He chooses a church, one unified whole, with Christ as Head.
- d. For teaching that the church is "*the company of the predestinated*" Jan Hus was burned at the stake in 1415 at the Council of Constance. This is creedal, Heid. Cat, LD 21.

2. Therefore, we must understand salvation in close connection with the church.

- a. This aspect of salvation is seriously neglected today by Evangelicalism: God does not save His people merely as individuals; He saves them as part of the church; Acts 2:47; I Cor. 12:12-13.
- b. The idea that a person could be a Christian but not a “church Christian” is unknown in the Bible.
- c. Therefore, it must be the goal of evangelism, not simply to bring someone to Christ, but to bring him into the church, where he and his children become active members.
- d. The Lord gathers His elect into the church from the children of believers and from the world. The church is the *ecclesia* which means the “called out” (out of the world, unto Christ and God).
- e. The church does not gather herself: her members are not those of a voluntary society.

II. SOME IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS

A. There is one church but that church can be seen from various aspects.

1. There is the church militant, triumphant and latent.

- a. The church militant is that part of the church universal which is now on the earth actively fighting the forces of darkness. The church’s enemies are sin, the world, the false church and the devil, Eph. 6:12; II Cor. 10:3-5; Rev. 12:17. The militancy of the church is *only* spiritual.
- b. The church triumphant is that part of the church universal which is enjoying conscious rest in heaven after having fought faithfully on the earth. II Tim. 4:7-8; Rev. 6:9-11, 7:14, 14:13.
- c. The church latent is that part of the church universal which has not yet been gathered; such are the elect, but they have not yet been born or they have not yet been converted, II Peter 3:9.
- d. These distinctions do justice to the fact that the church is the company of the predestinated.

2. There is the church visible and the church invisible.

- a. This is closely connected to the distinction between the church organism and the church institute.
- b. The church invisible is the church considered from its inner, spiritual life; her life of faith, her union with Christ. We confess, “I believe [not “I see”] an holy catholic church.”
- c. The church visible is the manifestation of that spiritual life in the world in its worship, preaching, sacraments, etc. Hypocrites can be (and are) members of the visible church but never of the invisible church.

B. The spiritual organism of the church manifests itself in the church institute

1. The church universal consists of many local congregations.

- a. The church institute is the local manifestation of the body and bride of Christ in a particular location at a particular time in history. I Cor. 1:2, 12:27; II Cor. 11:2
- b. Since each church is one whole it is possible to speak of “churches” (plural) as manifestations of the one, universal church (Acts 16:5; I Cor. 14:33; Gal. 1:2).
- c. But, what is a church? It is not simply a gathering of a few believers. For example, a few believers meeting at home to study the Bible is not a church. A church requires something more.

2. The church institute must have office bearers to rule it under the headship of Christ.

- a. This is what distinguishes a church from a mere fellowship. A fellowship is an informal gathering of Christians. A fellowship must strive to become a church by reaching a point of maturity (based on doctrinal unity, spiritual maturity and size, etc) where it can call its own office bearers. This is the slow, difficult work of missions which requires patience and diligence.
- b. Office bearers are essential to the church: Acts 14:23; Phil 1:1; I Tim. 3:1, 15; Tit. 1:5.
- c. It is the calling of every Christian to become and remain a member of a true church, and thus to submit to the doctrine, worship and oversight of the local congregation: Heb. 13:17.

3. The institution of the true church has three “marks” or distinguishing features.

- a. The greatest of all the marks is the preaching of the true gospel. The mark is not that the minister is nice, or friendly, or even that he has an interesting message. The issue is sound doctrine.
- b. The second mark is the right administration of the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. A group of Christians without sacraments is not a church.
- c. The third mark is the faithful exercise of Christian discipline. Lose this mark and the church is doomed to fall into sin. *Next time, the attributes of the church and the government of the church.*