

CHAPTER 14

ECCLESIOLOGY

A. The Doctrine of the Church

Paul Minear, in his book *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, states that the New Testament explains the church in about 100 different metaphors and figures of speech.¹ There are very few references to the church in the Gospels; of those few, the most important is: "You are Peter, the Rock; and on this rock I will build my church" (Mt. 16:18).

But Paul is the chief source for a biblical doctrine of the church. In his epistles, the Church is called an assembly of believers, the fellowship of saints, the household of God, the family of God, God's kingdom, His temple, the body of Christ and God's new creation. According to Paul, the Church represents the vineyard of God and the flock of Christ. The first thing that is apparent about New Testament ecclesiology is its variety.

1. The New Testament Church is called the people of God; this is rooted in the Old Testament. As Israel was elected to be God's representative and witness, so is the Church, the New Testament declares. Therefore from the beginning, Christians thought of their mission in terms of Israel's vocation. They believed they were the chosen remnant and God's newly cove-

nanted people. From New Testament times onward, the Church was called the new Israel.

2. The Church is the creation of the Holy Spirit. Paul says the Lord of the Church is the Spirit, and the Church is the temple of the Spirit.² It is therefore not an institution which has its own power, but is subordinate to the Spirit's guidance and God's presence. The Spirit descends upon the Church as an eschatological gift, as Joel prophesied in the Old Testament, so that young men can have visions and old men can be inspired in dreams (Joel 2:28-29).

3. Paul defined the church as the body of Christ, in a metaphor which stresses the unity between Christians and Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). The body of Christ metaphor applies not only to the whole church but also to each local congregation. Because it is Christ's body, Christ is the origin and goal of the Church, its Alpha and Omega. Moreover, as Christ's body he reigns over it and it is expected to be obedient to him.

4. The New Testament defines the Church as the future bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2). Hence, the Church is traditionally described in feminine terms. This nuptial imagery points to the consummation of history when the marriage feast of the Lamb will take place. Its present state is incomplete; the goal of the Church is still to be realized.

B. Interpretations since New Testament Times

Three different interpretations of the Church developed after New Testament times:

1. First is the horizontal, or Catholic view. According to this concept, the Church is a worldwide institution whose unity is guaranteed by a hierarchy of bishops obedient to the vicar of Christ at Rome. This priestly and sacramental organism is the mystical body of Christ whose leader, the Pope, is infallible in

matters of faith and morals because he has the authority of Peter, to whom Christ gave the keys of heaven.

In traditional Roman Catholic theology, Christ continues his ministry on earth, through the magisterium (governing authority) of his church. Catholics maintain that the Church is the extension of the incarnation. It is a visible as well as a mystical body, guided by the legitimate successors of Peter, the prince of the apostles. Peter handed on his powers to his successor, who bestowed them on his successor, and so on down to the present Bishop of Rome.

Priests play a central role in this doctrine of the Church. Each priest is authorized by the Holy See to teach, govern and celebrate the Mass. His function is to care for the faithful as a shepherd from birth to death, through preaching, administering and providing the sacraments to his parish, in accordance with the rules laid down by the Pope. In the Roman Catholic view, the visible Church is identified with the kingdom of God, although it is recognized that the present Christian community, called the "Church militant," will in time become a more glorious reality, the "Church triumphant."

Protestants question this horizontal concept of the Church. Is the existing Church really the kingdom of God on earth? Have not Roman Catholics absolutized the Church? Doesn't an institutional and hierarchical understanding of the Church ignore the eschatological reality of the body of Christ? Finally, has not Roman Catholic authoritarianism denied the true spirit of the Gospel? Hence, for Protestants the papal definition of Christianity suffers from the defects of absolutism and legalism. In recent years, a growing number of Catholics have recognized these dangers, and have attempted to revise their ecclesiology.

2. To counteract the Catholic view, Protestants created a vertical doctrine of the Church. According to the Reformers, the

essence of the Church is in its saving message, rather than its institutional structure. As Luther put it, the Church is where the Word of God is truly preached and heard, and where the sacraments are rightly administered. This view emphasizes the confessional nature of the Church. The Church exists because of its vertical relationship to its living Lord. "Where Christ is, there is the Church."

For Protestants, the Church consists of the congregation of the faithful. It is made up of believers, those whom God has called to assemble together in the name of Christ. Thus, the Church is characterized by listening to the Word and witnessing to the Gospel. Luther said that the Church implies a priesthood of all believers, which means that every Christian should be a priest for others, a Christ for his neighbors.

For classical Protestantism, the Church is the Church of the Word, and thus the Bible is at the center of Reformation Christianity. The clergy are students and teachers of God's Word. To go to church is to hear the biblical message proclaimed and applied to our present situation. To be a Christian is to read, hear, understand and obey God's revelation in scripture. As the Disciples of Christ denomination declares, "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; and where the Bible is silent, we are silent."

For the Reformers, the Church is both visible and invisible. The visible Church is made up of congregations of baptized members, while the invisible Church contains those whom God has called and who are faithful to Him. Only God knows who is truly a Christian; just because someone has been baptized or joins a church does not make him one of Christ's elect. Hence, Protestants do not identify the visible Church with the kingdom of God on earth. Tillich, for example, speaks of "latent Christians" who belong to the body of Christ even though they are unbaptized, unchurched, and perhaps even

hostile to the institutional churches.³ The visible Church is not an extension of the incarnation, as Catholics believe; it is only a group of people pointing to Christ.

Classical Protestants also give a different interpretation of apostolic succession. The apostles were not Christ's successors. They did not inherit his power and authority. The apostles were merely witnesses to his work. We become their successors when we become, like them, ambassadors for Christ.

Finally, the Reformers emphasized not the magisterium but the ministerium (serving function) of the Church. The Church is here to minister to others rather than to rule over men. Like Jesus himself, the Church comes in the form of a servant. God alone is our master. We are all brothers and sisters. Hence Protestantism has been the seedbed of democratic governments and has opposed all forms of totalitarian statism.

3. A third definition of the Church originated with the left wing of the Reformation—the Anabaptists, Independents and Quakers who were more radical than Luther or Calvin. These sects advocated the doctrine of the Free Church, stressing both the individual's direct access to God and his subjective response to God's call. Today, Congregationalists, Baptists, Unitarians, Quakers and Pietists advocate the Free Church interpretation of Christianity. For such Protestants, the Church is the community of the Holy Spirit; Church membership is therefore based on one's personal religious experience. A believer is one who has immediate contact with the Spirit. There is no need for a priesthood or hierarchy, because all true Christians experience the unmediated presence of God.

Free Church Christians are of two types: the evangelicals and the mystical rationalists. The evangelicals say that every Christian must be born again; the Church is a closely-knit fellowship of the converted. The mystical rationalists stress that because the Church is a creation of the Spirit, they are not

bound by creeds, dogmas or ecclesiastical rules: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17). Therefore they prize Paul's statement: "Stand firm, then, and refuse to be tied to the yoke of slavery again" (Gal. 5:1). Sometimes this view has led to antinomian practices, as in the Free Spirit movement of the Middle Ages.

Like the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Church, the two Protestant definitions have been criticized in recent years. Classical Reformation ecclesiology so stresses right preaching and correct doctrine that it easily succumbs to biblical literalism and intellectualism. The critics say that Christianity is much more than preaching and believing orthodox doctrines. Also, Reformation teaching ignores the fact that the Church is more than a means to an end. The Church is not just a place for study and worship. It is the body of Christ and the matrix for the coming kingdom. The Church as a community nourishes our spiritual life and provides a launching pad for successful witnessing. Furthermore, the distinction between the visible and invisible Church poses serious dangers. On the one hand, it weakens faith in the visible Church, which is the real place where Christians must worship and work. On the other hand, it encourages dissidents to break from the visible Church and found sects which claim to represent the invisible Church. Finally, the Reformation produced national state churches in Germany, Switzerland, England and Scandinavia, where most people are now only nominally Christian.

The Free Church idea has received even more rigorous criticism since the birth of the ecumenical movement. Free Churchmen are easily victimized by heretics, because the Free Church has no authoritative dogmas and no protective structure. Furthermore, twice-born Christians espouse an elitist type of Christianity, thinking of themselves as the only true Christians. This makes Christianity too exclusive, and makes them self-righteous.

Because of Vatican II and the creation of the World Council of Churches, theologians have been inspired to redefine the nature of the Church. No existing ecclesiology is adequate. The Catholic, Reformation and Free Church models all suffer from serious defects. However, as yet no satisfactory substitute or synthesis has been developed.

C. Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Ideas of the Church

Since the beginning of the ecumenical movement, Eastern Orthodox churchmen have been in touch with Protestant and Catholic theologians. Their witness at ecumenical assemblies has encouraged modern Christians to find a middle path between Rome and Geneva. Emigre Russian Orthodox theologians⁴ in particular have espoused an ecclesiology based upon St. John rather than Bishop Peter or Professor Paul, as they put it.

How is the Eastern Orthodox concept of the Church different? How is ecclesiology based on Johannine Christianity superior to the Petrine view of the Catholics or the Pauline view of the Protestants? In four ways, say modern Russian Orthodox theologians.

1. Johannine theology corrects Catholic institutionalism and Protestant individualism by providing a mystical interpretation of the Church. The Church is new life with Christ and in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit. That is, the Church can be defined as the domain where the Holy Spirit lives and works. The Church represents the blessed life of the Spirit in humanity.
2. The Orthodox do not sharply separate the clergy from the laity. The bishop never works above the Church but with the Church. The laity are not merely passive; they are not like empty vessels waiting to be filled with grace by the priests. The Eastern Orthodox say that to put the Pope above the Church,

as Catholics do, is to destroy the Church's union in love.

3. The Russian theologians interpret the role of the bishop in sacramental rather than institutional terms, as do the Catholics, or in doctrinal terms, as do Reformation Protestants. What is a bishop? Not an administrator; not a theologian. As St. Ignatius of Antioch explained, the bishop is the one empowered to celebrate the Eucharist (Smyrn. 8). Therefore to be a clergyman is to transmit the mystical life of sacramental grace in the Church. His power is not legislative, administrative or doctrinal but mystical. Clergy exist to bring men into communion with God.

4. The Orthodox define the Church not in terms of dogma or regulations but fellowship. Their chief word is *sobornost*, a Russian word meaning bringing together, assembling, harmonizing or uniting. Orthodoxy is built upon the principle of conciliarism, rather than papalism or individualism.

This is why the Orthodox stress the central importance of the ecumenical councils. Catholics err in believing in papal infallibility, while Protestants are mistaken to rely on private conscience. According to the Orthodox, Christ speaks when the whole church takes counsel together. An ecumenical council of bishops, clergy, and laymen can speak to the world out of the mystical and metaphysical depth of the whole Church, present and past, visible and invisible. Thus the final authority comes from the Spirit dwelling in the entire church.

D. Contemporary Roman Catholic Ideas of the Church

What are marks of the true Church? According to the Nicæan creed, the Church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Ever since the 4th century, Christians have agreed that these four characteristics are indispensable marks or notes of the

true Church. Because the Church was born out of the experience of the Holy Spirit and witnesses to the continuing activity of Christ, the Church must be united, holy, catholic (or universal), and apostolic.

1. The Church is the one body of Christ; Christ gathers his disciples around him and unites them in a single fellowship. The Church is unified because of its devotion to the one Lord Jesus Christ. But this oneness in Christ does not require uniformity of organization, ritual and doctrine. At the same time, Christian unity points beyond a united Christian fellowship. The Church's given oneness should be understood as an eschatological sign of the coming unity of all creation with its Creator.

2. The Church is holy. This does not mean that its members are sinless and perfect. It refers to the fact that the Church has been sanctified (set apart) by Christ. It is in but not of the world. This ecclesiastical mark should be interpreted eschatologically. The present holiness of the Church points to the coming sanctification of the whole cosmos when God's will is completely realized.

3. The church is catholic (or worldwide and ecumenical). To be catholic literally means to be whole, not merely a part. From its early days, the church was praised for holding "that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all," in the words of Vincent of Lerins. In the Church, a believer experiences wholeness of life and fullness of truth through Christ. Catholicity for the Church has an eschatological dimension, because it exists for the sanctification of the entire world. Its mission is global.

4. The Church must be apostolic. Our present Church is part of a vast movement which goes back to the twelve apostles. True apostolic succession means that today's Christians must be like the original apostles. Like them, we are called to be witnesses and ambassadors for Christ. Hence, it is not the

laying on of hands—a rite traced back to Peter and the other apostles—which is so important for Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and Anglicans. A truly valid Christian ministry is based on Christ's call to witness and service. Not a transfer of ecclesiastical power, but a spirit of missionary commitment and enthusiasm makes one a true successor of the apostles.

Unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity—these are the characteristics of the Church, which come from Jesus Christ. They are ontological⁵ attributes of the Church and its goals.⁶

E. Contemporary Protestant Views of the Church

Protestants have recently rediscovered the meaning of the gathered Church. What is the Church? 1) It is a congregation of those who have been called by Christ to gather together and work on his behalf. The Greek word *ekklesia* refers to an assembly of people. 2) The Church is described by the Greek word *koinonia* (fellowship or community). The Church is made up of those who are in communion with one another. 3) Equally necessary is the scattering of the Church. Christians do not exist to enjoy each other's companionship; they are commissioned by their Lord to witness to the whole world. Christians must scatter in order to serve. This is why the New Testament describes the Church as a *diakonia* (serving community) or even a *martyria*—a witnessing fellowship which is not even afraid to face death. Hence, in the early Church, those who died for their faith were named martyrs, literally "witnesses."

We agree with this Protestant view. We do not believe that the present-day churches are the kingdom of God. A church is a congregation of those called by God to be raised spiritually, educated and trained to work for His kingdom.

For that mission—witnessing to the whole world—they will have to be scattered; although sometimes they meet together for fellowship and further training.

Catholics emphasize the oneness and universality of the Church. This should be the goal for all Christians. Christians should be open-minded, cultivate fellowship beyond their own denominations, have friendly dialogue to overcome minor differences, and cooperate for the ecumenical goals Christ set for us.

As many prominent theologians realize, we are living in a pluralistic religious world. The World Council of Churches and the Vatican are encouraging dialogue with people of non-Christian faiths. From now on, this age will not tolerate parochialism or narrow-minded denominationalism. This ecumenical trend forces us to learn from one another, to share with one another and to work together, regardless of sectarian loyalties. Who can be blind or deaf not to see and hear God's supreme commandment for our time? God's will is to build His kingdom of harmony and unity on earth.

Note on the Sacraments

For the majority of Christians, the sacraments are an indispensable part of their faith. A sacrament is a visible means to obtain grace. All sacraments must be directly or indirectly supported by biblical texts. In the Old Testament, circumcision and sacrificial rites were outward signs of God's covenantal blessings and became preparation for the sacraments of the New Testament age. Among the Christian sacraments the most important are baptism and the Lord's Supper, which were authorized by Christ. All others are implicitly approved by Jesus—such as penance and marriage—or were practiced in the New Testament period.

Most Christians consider the sacraments as necessary means of salvation. Each sacrament has two parts: material elements and a correct verbal form. The efficacy of the sacraments comes from God through Christ to the Church. Each is designed to confer justification or to aid in sanctification. They should therefore be received with gratitude as ways God communicates Himself to believers.

The Roman Catholic theology of the sacraments was developed during the Middle Ages and further refined as a result of controversies with Protestants during the Reformation. Luther, Calvin and Zwingli opposed many of the sacramental beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church, and worked out different understandings of the value and use of the sacraments. Since the Reformation, Christians have disagreed over the number of sacraments, the mode of baptism (by sprinkling or immersion), and the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

Most Protestants limit the sacraments to baptism and holy communion. A smaller group of Protestants—Quakers, Unitarians and the Salvation Army, for example—do not practice any sacramental rites. A large number of mainline Protestants do not think that the sacraments are necessary for salvation; that is, they are spiritually beneficial but not indispensable. However, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics continue to practice the seven traditional sacraments of the ancient Church: baptism, confirmation, penance, ordination, matrimony, anointing of the sick and the Eucharist. For these churches there is a sacrament for every important event in the believer's life, from birth to death.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 14

1 Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

2 G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 73-91.

3 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, pp. 152-155.

4 For an Orthodox view, see Sergius Bulgakov, *A Bulgakov Anthology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 119-138..

5 Ontological: part of the very being of the Church. Ontology is more basic than functional characteristics; the Church would not exist if it lacked the four marks.

Traditional Christianity says Jesus is divine by nature; he is the Messiah because he possesses God's substance. The chief thing about Jesus is his ontological nature. But for Jews and early Christians, the Messiah is like all other humans ontologically; he is only special because of the mission God gives him.

6 Moltmann's theory is opposed to the older view that the Church is already one, holy, catholic, apostolic. He says these are not present attributes but future goals—the Church should strive to be more one, more holy, more catholic and more universal. See *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), Ch. 7.