

CHERISHING THE CHURCH

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How important is the church in the life of the individual Christian? This question has been answered in various ways. At one end of the spectrum is the clericalism and absolutism of Roman Catholicism, in which the visible and institutional church, administered by a hierarchy of priests, bishops, and pope, claims and wields total power over the believer in matters pertaining to this life and the next. At the other end is the intense subjectivism and individualism of modern American evangelicalism, which holds that Christianity consists only in personal faith and which suspiciously regards the church as “organized religion.” Many agree with the notion that the church is a voluntary society.¹ “You don’t have to attend church to be a Christian,” they say. As a result, the church commands scant regard for her ordinances and office-bearers, and even less loyalty from her adherents. As an institution, the church must compete for support with the whole welter of Christian crusades, mission agencies, schools, publications, broadcasts, charities, and fund drives that crowd the landscape of evangelical America. The net result is that the church has lost all authority, and has been reduced to a revolving door where people are leaving as fast as they are coming in.

Both extremes are rooted in unbiblical views of the church. Both are unacceptable to the mind of the Reformers like John Calvin. While breaking with the clericalism, authoritarianism, and absolutism of Rome, Calvin nonetheless maintained a high view of the church: “If we do not prefer the church to all other objects of our interest we are unworthy of being counted among her members,” he wrote. Calvin agreed with Cyprian and Augustine, who said, “He cannot have God for his Father who refuses to have the church for his mother.” To this Calvin added, “For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels.”² So, the church is essential for spiritual nourishment and maturation.

Calvin warns us to avoid a church that is an absolute authority, an infallible teacher, and a center of habitual grace. But he also urges us to avoid a church that is a center for rallies, entertainment, rehabilitation, or politics—a church that becomes a music hall, a social institution, or an evangelistic circus. Instead, Calvin calls us back to Scripture to consider what Christ has said about His church.

In the past, Reformed believers have profoundly cherished the church. Today, that sense of appreciation is waning in general. Many Protestants have depreciated the place

¹ Michael Horton, *We Believe: Recovering the Essentials of the Apostles’ Creed* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 193.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.1, 4.1.4.

the church occupies as Christ's institution.³ This lowered view of the church is fostered by a lack of understanding about what the church truly is as Christ's institution. It disregards Jesus' words to Peter: "Upon this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). Calvin would say that we cannot really understand what the church is and why we should appreciate her until we truly understand the meaning of those words. To that end, I want to address three things: first, the *status* of the church as belonging to Christ ("My church"); second, the *substance* of the church as founded on Christ ("upon this rock"); third, the success of the church as the workmanship of Christ ("I will build")—all of which should increasingly move us to cherish the church.⁴

The Church's Status: Belonging to Christ

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus speaks about the church as the epicenter of His vision. There is a programmatic ring about the words He uses. He doesn't just say, "Peter, by the way, I am planning to build the church." Rather, He tells Peter with absolute certainty that He will build His church, despite the gates of hell that will try to prevail against it. It is as if He says to Peter and to us, "Since you have recognized My true identity as the Son of God, I want you to understand what lies at the heart of My ministry. The reason I have come into the world as the Christ is so that by My Spirit-anointed ministry I might bring into being a church that belongs to Myself." So right from the beginning of this Christian community, Jesus makes clear that He has not simply come to save isolated sheep, but rather to bind His chosen sheep together in an amazing community that He is pleased to call His own church.

Jesus used the Greek word *ekklesia* to describe His church.⁵ The only other place in the Gospels where *ekklesia* is used is Matthew 18:17. But the term is used throughout the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the the Old Testament) and New Testament to translate the Hebrew word *qahal*, which describes the congregation or assembly of God's chosen and privileged people, Israel. As God's *ekklesia*, Israel is called to know, love, and serve Him.

John Murray wrote, "When Jesus speaks of 'my church,' he is thinking of those gathered and knit together after the pattern provided by the Old Testament as the people for his possession, as the community which he is to constitute, and which stands in a relation to him comparable to the congregation of the Lord in the Old Testament."⁶ Several aspects of God's relationship with the *ekklesia* are still true of the church today.

³ John Murray, "The Church—Its Identity, Functions, and Resources," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 1:238.

⁴ Parts of this paper have been adapted from my "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken," in *Onward, Christian Soldiers: Protestants Affirm the Church* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), 23–67.

⁵ Lothar Coenen, "Church," in *The New Theological Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:291–307; D. Douglas Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church* (1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 571–76; Thomas Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 4–5, 10–11.

⁶ "The Nature and Unity of the Church," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:323.

Both Israel and the church are called by sovereign grace out of Egypt (Hos. 11:1–5) and the world. Both are called by God into a covenantal relationship with Him to accomplish a vital kingdom task. Both are called to worship God in community. And both are called to future inheritance in the heavenly Canaan.⁷

When Jesus said “my church” in Matthew 16, He was claiming God’s people as His own. The *ekklesia* is thus His assembly, His people, bound to Him with ties far deeper than those of family or friendship. The *ekklesia* is defined in Matthew 16:18 by her saving relationship to Jesus the Messiah, who has done for her what the sacrificial system in the old economy merely foreshadowed in its attempt to atone for sin. The *ekklesia* is a people bonded to Christ in love, mercy, forgiveness, and dependence.⁸

Christ’s assembly started with a small group of ordinary people. When He looked at His disciples, He spoke concerning His whole church: “You are mine, you belong to Me.” The word *my* in the original is moved from its normal grammatical position to show that emphasis. Jesus did not use that possessive pronoun lightly. Significantly, He talked about “my Father,” “my friends,” and “my church,” but never about “my money” or “my property.”

Now, we value what belongs to famous people. If I were to ask you how much you would give me for an antique pen, you might offer me \$20 to \$50. But if I were to say, “This is the pen that John Calvin used to write the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,” you would probably offer me considerably more. The value of the object would increase substantially because of the person who owned it.

The church belongs to Jesus Christ. The church is His by *gift*, for all that the Father gives Him, shall come to Him (John 6:37; cf. John 17). The church is His by *promise*, for the Father promised her to His Son (Ps. 2:8). And the church is His by *purchase*, for Christ has bought her with His own precious blood (1 Peter 1:19).

To make the church His, Christ will engage in a threefold task. First, He will build His church through His crucifixion. He will die for His people to cleanse them from their sin and make them fit for the presence of God. Second, He will build His church by His exaltation. He will rise from the dead in triumphant glory on the third day to send His Holy Spirit to draw men and women, boys and girls to Himself and into His kingdom. Third, He will build His church by the proclamation of the gospel. And so He says to Peter in Matthew 16:19, “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven”—keys that the Heidelberg Catechism rightly and famously refers to as the preaching of the gospel (Q. 83)—“and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

All three of these tasks coalesce on Pentecost when the Spirit says, as it were, to Peter, “Bring out now the keys that Jesus put into your pocket, proclaim the crucified and exalted Christ, and thereby open the kingdom of heaven to those who will repent and believe.” And suddenly, the very man who only weeks ago had denied that he ever knew

⁷ David Watson, *I Believe in The Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 67–74.

⁸ Cyril Charles Richardson, *The Church Through the Centuries* (London: Religious Book Club, 1938), 19–23.

the Lord Jesus Christ is filled with the Holy Spirit, preaches the gospel, and the Christian church, from being a small company of 120 men and women in Acts 1, becomes a church of 3,120 by the end of Acts 2, as Jesus fulfills His glorious promise, “I will build my church.”⁹

Because the church is the center of the vision of Christ, the Savior was willing to give His all for her. In Ephesians 5:25, Paul says that Christ “loved the church, and gave himself for it.” In Acts 20:28, Paul speaks of “the church of God” that God “hath purchased with his own blood”—that is, with the atoning blood of His Son.

Golgotha, where Christ died for His church, was not a pretty place. It was not a sentimental spot for tourists but a place of blood and death and punishment. Yet, this bloody punishment of sin is precisely what we deserve, for the wages of sin are death and hell (Rom. 6:23; Rev. 21:8), where the smoke of torment justly ascends day and night forever (Rev. 14:10–11). Only when we see how ugly sin is and how justly we deserve such punishment do we perceive the wonder of what transpired at Golgotha.

Reformed evangelicals are often criticized for being preoccupied with sin. Yet the most appalling utterances about sin are found in Scripture, not in our confessions of faith or in the words of Calvin or Bunyan. What is human society really like? The prophet Isaiah said Israel as a society was like a man covered in boils and ulcers from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet (Isa. 1:6). Jesus said that “out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (Matt. 15:19). Paul likened human society to a community of snakes with poison under their lips (Rom. 3:13). The book of Revelation compares the condition of man to a bottomless pit opened by a great, divine hand, with the smoke of depravity and the everlasting burnings of hell pouring forth and obscuring the light of the sun (Rev. 9:1–3).

Lest you think such biblical illustrations go too far in describing the depravity of man, consider what western civilization has done. What kind of depravity was exhibited when Africans were enslaved and whipped into submission? What about those who subjected Jews to gas chambers, incinerators, and torture? What about those who vacuum unborn children out of wombs, cut them up, incinerate them, then boast of “the right to choose”? We stand before God in a corporate silence of guilt.

Society’s history is no different from our own as individuals. The record of each of us testifies against us. Our thoughts, fantasies, emotions, resentments, bitterness, and self-pity condemn us. Our words, which are so often harsh, cruel, and cold, repeatedly condemn us. And our actions are little better: what we do even to our dearest friends and those who most depend on us condemns us.

So immense is our depravity before God that there is only one way we can be reconciled to Him. That way is through God’s Son, who came into this world to take on our flesh and dwell among us. The eternal Son of God born in a stable to dwell among men! The immortal Son clothing Himself with rags of mortality! God, who made man after His image, Himself made in man’s image! And if that wasn’t enough, He also

⁹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, “The Church that Christ Builds” (lecture delivered at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, May 14, 2009).

offered that life as a ransom for us. “I must die,” He said from the beginning. “The bridegroom will be wrenched away from you and you will fast in that day. But I must go to Jerusalem for your welfare, to be a ransom for your sin. I did not come to be ministered to but to minister” (cf. Matt. 20:28; Phil. 2:6–8).

The only way God can forgive our sin is through Christ. Jesus endured the wrath of a sin-hating God against us, tasting death for us, entering the lake of fire for us, going into the bottomless pit as our substitute. “He descended into hell” and “gave up the ghost.” That was what Golgotha was all about. When you sing about the wondrous cross on which your Savior died, you should not think of something pleasant and beautiful and refreshing, but rather of everything that is ugly and atrocious and revolting. Golgotha was a place of skulls and bones and bleeding flesh.

Three crude crosses, dingy and blood-stained, support three naked bodies in that awful place. Every insult possible is shouted against one of those prisoners, the one in the center, whose name is Jesus. Soldiers, spectators, priests, and elders hurl their hate against Jesus. The only one who dares to speak in His defense is a dying thief. The tender-hearted women who followed Him are silent, the disciples who loved Him are too terrified to rise in His defense. His brothers and his friends have forsaken Him. Worst of all, so has God. The face of the Father that Jesus always turned to in love and adoration is now turned away. He has become an outcast from His Father’s house.

This is what God thinks about sin and depravity. Sin is terrifying in the presence of Sinai’s thunder and lightning, but sin is most bitter, as Thomas Watson said, in the “red glass” of Christ’s suffering. There Christ hangs in the naked flame of God’s holiness, bearing our sin, wounded for our transgressions. The unclean place, the passions of the mob, the sufferings of the soul, the darkened sun, the coldness of God, and His holy revulsion against sin—such are the wages of sin!

This is the dowry that Jesus Christ paid to His Father for His bride, the church. As William Gurnall wrote, “The church is taken out of dying Jesus’ side, as Eve [was born] out of sleeping Adam’s” side. We must remember that incalculable dowry of suffering and blood when we are tempted to slight the church, take her for granted, or neglect our duties toward her. If the Lord Jesus Christ cherished the church so much that He died for her, is it too much for Him to ask His followers to cherish the church and live for her?

Cherishing the church as the purchased bride of Christ doesn’t negate all criticism of the church. But healthy criticism, which is based on Scripture, is measured out with sorrow and pain. Unhealthy criticism is sour and destructive and is wholly subjective. Men who love their wives can take a great deal of criticism against themselves, but they do not take kindly to unkind comments directed against their spouses. Similarly, Jesus Christ does not approve of us when we thoughtlessly criticize His bride (cf. Eph. 5:22–33).

What do we think of the church? Do we cherish her as Jesus did and weep for her weaknesses as Jeremiah did? Does the church stand in the center of our vision as well?

For most Christians today, I suppose the family represents the center of our vision. We promote and defend our personal family, which is a great thing to do, but not at the expense of the church family. Have you ever considered that as precious as our family is,

our personal, immediate family is only an interim arrangement? Our church family life, however, is for all eternity, as Calvin emphasized. Therefore, my great responsibility as a father is to share Jesus Christ's vision and, by the Spirit's grace, to fold my family into the greater and more lasting family of the people of God—a family united by common faith. Here in our text Jesus is promoting this vision for us, so that we might understand that the living church consists of our brothers and sisters, not merely of the flesh, but of the Spirit. When a congregation gets hold of this, it becomes such a gloriously new and different community that people begin to ask, What is it that God is doing among these people? They seem so addicted to the apostle's teaching, and to fellowship and priestly ministry among one another. The answer, of course, is that they have caught sight of the vision of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that the church is not an added extra to their personal salvation or their personal family life. The church of Christ is that new community He is creating into which our faith in Jesus Christ and our personal family lives are folded in order that we might be enriched by the community of the people of God. What a great vision the Lord Jesus Christ has of building His very own church!¹⁰

The Church's Substance: Founded on Christ

Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Wars have been fought over the meaning of those words, people have shed blood and spilled ink over them, and church leaders and synods have argued endlessly over them. Those very words are also inscribed in letters of gold on the great dome of St. Peter's in Rome. In fact, Roman Catholicism says that the rock is literally Peter, who served as Christ's vicar on earth. Peter in turn is claimed as founder of the church of Rome. His role as "vicar of Christ" was passed to succeeding bishops, Rome claims.

Most Protestants acknowledge that these words refer partly to Peter, whose name derives from the word for "stone."¹¹ But the rock refers more to the content of what Peter is confessing than it does to his person. As Lenski points out, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), refers to "the divine revelation from which that confession sprang and to which Jesus refers so significantly in verse 17, 'Blessed are thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.'"¹² Peter here is spokesman for the rest of the disciples, whose confession of this divine revelation matches his. That is evident from Jesus' question, "Whom say ye that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). And that explains why in Matthew 18:18, the rest of the disciples receive the same keys of the kingdom that were previously given to Peter (Matt. 16:19). If the rock were Peter, Christ would probably have said, "You are

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ This acknowledgment is not a capitulation to Rome's view. Even if the rock were referring wholly to Peter, the Roman Catholic would still have to prove several things that are not supported by the text. John A. Broadus said that these include: that Peter alone was to be the founder of Christianity, that he was viceregent of God and the sovereign of all Christians, that his supposed authority was transmissible as well as actually transmitted to the leading official of the church at Rome, and that Peter lived and died at Rome (*Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* [1886; reprint, Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, n.d.], 356–57).

¹² R. C. H. Lenski, *Matthew* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964), 626.

Peter (*petra*, rock) and upon this Peter (*petra*, rock), I will build my church.” Instead, Christ used a diversity of form and gender in Greek words (*petros* and *petra*) that is “too abrupt and marked to be . . . fortuitous,” wrote Joseph Addison Alexander.¹³ The rock was not the natural, unstable reasoning of Peter, but the mighty truth the Father had revealed to Peter—namely, the Messiahship and divine Sonship of Jesus. Though Peter himself cannot be entirely separated from his confession of the divine revelation, the focus in this context is on the divine revelation that lay behind his confession of Christ’s true identity.

When Christ therefore declares, “Upon this rock I will build my church,” He refers to what Peter has confessed: His own identity and office as the Son of God and Israel’s promised Messiah.¹⁴ The church shows the foundation on which she is built by her confession. She rests on the reality of the objective revelation that Peter confessed. That is the church’s true foundation; the true church is built on it. “The truth that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, very God and very Man in one Person, the anointed Savior of the world, is the main groundstone whereupon the faith of all believers is founded, as upon a rock,” David Dickson said.¹⁵

Thus, the rock on which the church is built is Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. This does justice to the classical distinction Jesus maintained between *petros* (stone) and *petra* (rock), which may indicate, according to Alexander, that “while Peter was a stone, i.e. a fragment of the rock, his Master was the rock itself.”¹⁶ According to the Bible, three revealed truths flow out of this:

- First, Christ alone, as He is revealed in the Scriptures, is the chief cornerstone of the church’s structure. That’s why 1 Corinthians 3:11 says, “Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”
- Second, the apostles build their doctrine on Christ as the chief cornerstone. That’s why Ephesians 2:20 refers to believers being “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.”
- Third, believers themselves are living stones, built on the foundation of the apostles, who in turn are built on the chief cornerstone. That’s why 1 Peter 2:4–5 says that believers come to Christ “as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, [so] ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.” Each particular believer, like a stone in God’s ever-growing temple, has a unique place in the purpose of God.

¹³ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (London: James Nisbet, 1861), 439.

¹⁴ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 67–68.

¹⁵ David Dickson, *Matthew* (1647; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 224.

¹⁶Alexander, *Matthew*, 439.

Thus, these revealed truths were never intended to be for Peter alone or only for the stream of his supposed papal successors. All the disciples of his age and of ours share in this divine revelation. As Lenski notes: “Luther is right: ‘All Christians are Peters on account of the confession which Peter here makes, which is the rock on which Peter and all Peters are built’—understanding Luther to refer to the truth held and confessed by Peter and these Peters.”¹⁷

Whatever else we may say about these words, we can certainly say that the church is founded on Jesus Christ and that the chief article of the Christian faith is trust in Christ. That’s the basic mark of belonging to what the Reformers, following Augustine and John Wycliffe, called the invisible church. Calvin said that the invisible church consists of the elect, whose names are in the Lamb’s book of life (Rev. 21:27) and who will become known by saving faith and its fruits (Matt. 7:20).¹⁸ Thus a person can be a member of the visible church (the church as we see it) of professing believers, yet not be a part of the invisible church (the church as God sees it) of genuine believers who have a true, saving relationship with Christ.¹⁹ The invisible church is the true church, said Heinrich Bullinger, a great Swiss Reformer.²⁰

That distinction guards us against equating membership in the visible church with salvation. Just belonging to a church doesn’t make someone a true believer any more than owning an organ makes one a true musician. The saving work of the Holy Spirit welds Christians together. Whatever their differences, all true Christians are saved by Spirit-worked faith and trust in Christ alone (*solus Christus*). A church so constituted builds on Christ as on a rock.

Jesus Christ is the mediator, minister, and surety of His church. But the substance with which He builds His church is sinners. Jesus changes sinners by His power, makes them confessors of His name, and works commitment in their lives. When this is forgotten, the church weakens and begins to die. It is scandalous when churches list

¹⁷ Lenski, *Matthew*, 626.

¹⁸ Johannes Wyclif, *Tractatus de Ecclesia*, ed. Johann Loserth (London: Treubner, 1886), 2; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.7; David N. Wiley, “The Church as the Elect in the Theology of Calvin,” in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 96–117. Cf. Geddes MacGregor, *Corpus Christi: The Nature of the Church According to the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958); George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959); Kilian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Paul D. L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1981); Harro P. Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982).

¹⁹ Bannerman, *Church of Christ*, 1:29–40. Many in the Reformed community in recent decades have voiced concern about the formula and doctrine of the invisible church, including John Murray (*Collected Writings*, 1:231–36), though Murray later muted that criticism (*ibid.*, 4:262). Cf. Kuiper, *Glorious Body of Christ*, 26–30; Peter Toon, *God’s Church for Today* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1980), 26–28; Jelle Faber, “The Doctrine of the Church in Reformed Confessions,” *Essays in Reformed Doctrine* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance, 1990), 112–15; Stuart R. Jones, “The Invisible Church of the Westminster Confession of Faith,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997): 71–85.

²⁰ *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding, trans. H. I. (Cambridge: University Press, 1852), 5:7–9.

dozens, sometimes hundreds of families on their roles of membership who seldom attend worship services and show that they have no personal faith in Christ, no living relationship with Him. Many churches today are strong in membership but weak in discipleship. Such churches may seem strong numerically, but they are built on sand and will soon break down under stress. “The church is most evangelistic when she is least concerned about impressing the world or with adding to her numbers,” Iain Murray says. An inactive church member is a contradiction in terms.

Implied in the rock of Peter’s confession in Jesus Christ are the historic attributes of the church, best summarized by the Nicene Creed’s confession of “one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”²¹ Roman Catholics and Protestants have always taught that those attributes are inseparable from the essence of the church. But while Roman Catholics emphasize the visible, institutional form of those attributes, Protestants focus on their Spirit-worked and experiential character. As Charles Hodge said, “If the church is the body of those who are united to Christ by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, then the indwelling of the Spirit must make the church holy, visible, perpetual, one, catholic.”²² Each attribute begins with and finds fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

When Protestants say they believe in “one holy, catholic, apostolic church,” they confess that Christ, not the church or any man, is the rock on which every attribute of the church is built. Christ is the rock of the church’s unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity. He builds His church by means of officebearers and apostolic doctrine. Christ leads the church in all truth through the Holy Spirit. Ministers, said Calvin, must be “duly ordained, as ambassadors of God”; filled with the Spirit, His ministers speak words of comfort and lead the church in a holy course.²³

We do not believe *in* a church, however, for that would mean we place our trust in it. We believe only in Christ. We believe only that there is a church that is holy, catholic, and apostolic. As Calvin put it, the church is of divine appointment but is not divine; it is one, not many; true, yet imperfect; and free, being in bondage to no man.²⁴

It takes faith to confess these attributes of the church, because we often fail to see so many of them. When we gaze on the church’s external appearance, her garments appear soiled and torn. We see disunity rather than unity, unholiness rather than holiness, denominationalism rather than catholicity, and apostasy rather than apostolicity. We see a church that tragically withholds the gospel from people and then wonders why she has

²¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, trans. James E. Davison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) is entirely devoted to the unity, catholicity, apostolicity, and holiness of the church as she expounds her true ministry. Cf. standard works of systematic theology and works on the Belgic Confession of Faith (Articles 27–29), the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 54), the Westminster Confession (Chapter 25), and the Larger Catechism (Q. 61–64) (Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], 188–93).

²² Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), 8.

²³ For an excellent treatment of Calvin’s view of ministers and preaching, see Benjamin Charles Milner, Jr., *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Church* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 102–104.

²⁴ R. B. Kuiper, “Calvin’s Conception of the Church,” *Torch and Trumpet*, 10 (Feb. 1959):13–17.

lost her audience. Cold preaching, lukewarm members, love of power, lack of discipline, worldliness, entertainment, and politics usurp the gospel.

When we see the church's decline from within and society's threats from without, we are tempted to say that the church cannot survive. Nevertheless, we are not tempted to abandon her, for she, said Calvin, is our "mother." Though she appears to age and fail, we still cherish the church. By faith, we still trust that "the Son of God from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves to Himself by His Spirit and Word, out of the whole human race, a Church chosen to everlasting life, agreeing in true faith; and that I am and for ever shall remain, a living member thereof" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 54). Because the church is Christ's bride, she cannot fail. By faith, we believe she will complete Christ's purpose for her. Jesus guarantees that success when He says, "I will build my church."

The Church's Success: The Workmanship of Christ

Some believers belong to small, weak fellowships. They struggle from year to year while attendance dwindles. No new people are attracted to the church, there are few conversions, and people seem to have lost a true sense of the presence of God. People get discouraged. They become embarrassed, apologetic—even cynical about the church. They gradually start distancing themselves from the congregation as well as its ministries.

That slow but sure separation from the church in response to discouragement is part of Satan's strategy. It's the same kind of thing that prompted the disciples of Christ to forsake their Master as He was led away to be crucified. To fight Satan's efforts to separate us from the church, we must be reminded of the magnificent promise of the almighty Son of God: "I will build my church."

The Battle Against Darkness

Christ did not say, "I will try to build my church," or "I wish I could build my church." He said, "I *will* build my church. I created the heavens and the earth; I have called the world from nothing by My power. I, the Almighty, will build my church."

That is what Christ has determined to accomplish. It's His vow, backed by His authority in heaven and on earth. "Let me tell you what I will do," Christ says to Peter. "I will build my church. And even the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

The gates of hell (or Hades) lead to more than death. They lead to all the powers of darkness and evil. Jesus sees Hades, as it were, as an organized city with gates. A city gate in the ancient world was the place where judgment and wisdom were dispensed by the elders and rulers of the city. So what Jesus refers to here is what Paul describes in Ephesians 6:10–20 as the powers of darkness organized to destroy the people and kingdom of God. Jesus thus says that though the church is built in the midst of the conflict promised in Genesis 3:15 and pursued through the ages, it will not founder before the gates of the enemy. Christ's church may lose many skirmishes, but it will win the great battle. Christ is stronger than Satan; therefore His church will defeat Satan's army. The seed of the woman will prevail over the seed of the serpent.

That statement must have seemed preposterous to a handful of nobodies who followed Jesus. Yet Jesus looked at the fishermen, the tax collector, and the other disciples and promised, “Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

What seemed so preposterous has happened and is still happening. Throughout history, even when the church seemed overwhelmed by the powers of darkness, she has survived and grown. “God in the midst of her doth dwell,” John Flavel admonished people who were quick to mourn a faltering church. “Be not too quick to bury the church before she be dead.”

The church may stagger, but she will surely continue her march through history to ultimate triumph. That is because Jesus Christ guarantees her success. He will never dismiss her as irrelevant as others do. Individual churches may close their doors, denominations may wither, but the church of Christ will grow and prosper. As the Belgic Confession (Art. 27) says, “This holy church is preserved or supported by God against the rage of the whole world, even though she sometimes (for a while) appears very small and in the eyes of men, to be reduced to nothing: as during the perilous reign of Ahab when nevertheless the Lord reserved unto Him seven thousand men who had not bowed their knees to Baal.”

If we truly grasped God’s perspective of the church, many of the problems we struggle with in the local church would seem so small. Consider this, for example. While Israel saw only the rubbish of Jerusalem, God saw rebuilt walls (Is. 49:16). When we see a church torn by dissension, God sees a glorious church built up, as the living stones of New Jerusalem (1 Peter 2:5). She is elected by the Father (Eph. 1:3–6), redeemed by the Son (Eph. 1:7), and adopted by the Spirit (Rom. 8:15). She is glorious because of her role in the plan of God (Eph. 3:10–11), her holiness (Eph. 2:10), her access to God (Heb. 4:16), and her distinguished inheritance (Eph. 1:14, 18). As John Newton wrote:

*Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God,
He whose word cannot be broken formed thee for his own abode:
On the Rock of Ages founded, what can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation’s walls surrounded, thou may’st smile at all thy foes.*

A Work Under Construction

True Christians are members of the only successful institution on earth. “No group, no movement, no institution of any kind in the world can even approach to the glory, the splendour, the honour, the beauty, the magnificence, the wonder, the dignity, the excellence, the resplendency of the church of God,” writes Daniel Wray.²⁵ We should serve the church, and Christ through the church, with all our hearts, always remembering that our labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

²⁵ Daniel Wray, *The Importance of the Local Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 4–7. Cf. Kuiper, *Glorious Body of Christ*; Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005), 2:58–60.

Christ's building is not without organization. Calvin devoted almost all of Book IV, nearly one-third of his *Institutes*, to the subject of the church, and a good part of that was devoted to how Christ wants His church to be structured and organized by means of office-bearing. Calvin stresses that wherever Paul went in Acts 14, he established elders over the church. This, said Calvin, is essential for our well-being as the people of God. We are not to be lone rangers or rugged individualists. Being sinners, we need one another, we need the body of the church, and we need the structure that Christ gives to His body.

Calvin's old Genevan liturgy had the minister pray regularly before sermons, "Lord, we are miserable sinners." Since we don't get beyond that in this life, and we remain far too slothful and fickle and weak, Calvin said, we need the authority of preaching, the rule of elders, the compassion of deacons, and the communion of saints to assist, teach, and nurture us.²⁶

From one perspective we who are New Testament believers are the adult children of God. We are the inheritors of the new covenant. We have the fulfillment of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the blessing of the poured-out Spirit of Christ. We are a privileged people far beyond anyone in the old covenant. Yet, from another perspective, we are still growing children who have a long way to go. We need encouragement, admonition, and direction. And Christ provides us with this in the structure of His church.

No wonder, then, that Calvin, like many of the ancient fathers, loved the title of the church, "the mother of the faithful." The church is to be a good mother—loving, supporting, disciplining—so that believers might grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

The church, then, is a fleet of fishing boats, not a yachting club; a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints. We dedicate our lives as office-bearers and as members to a work in progress: to what Christ has promised and paid for with His own blood; to what is worthwhile and will be successful in the end, though there will always be dross amid the gold. The church's work, therefore, is never in vain. It is the product of God's sovereign grace in Christ, not the product of the mind and efforts of men.

Christ's promise that He will build the church is always being fulfilled. But on this side of the Day of Judgment, the church is under construction. And like any building site, this place of construction isn't necessarily tidy or impressive. It includes piles of bricks and boards, ugly trenches, waste, rubble, and scattered tools.

If we look at that mess, we can easily become discouraged. We see in the church so many unfinished people who are full of imperfections and weakness. If we think we're going to find something better than that, we only set ourselves up for disappointment.

²⁶ For Calvin on the teaching office, see Robert Henderson, *The Teaching Office in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962); on the ministry, see John H. Leith, "Calvin's Doctrine of the Proclamation of the Word and Its Significance for Today," in *John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform*, ed. Timothy George, 206–229; on the eldership, see Elsie Anne McKee, *Elders and the Plural Ministry: The Role of Exegetical History in Illuminating John Calvin's Theology* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1988); on the diaconry, see Elsie Anne McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1984).

Instead of criticizing people who fall short of our expectations, we ought to put on our boots, overalls, and helmets, and get busy on the worksite.

We should also prepare ourselves for a lot of hard work that may not seem to get much accomplished. Regardless, *ora et labora* (“pray and work!”) must become our work song. “The church of Christ needs servants of all kinds, and instruments of every sort; penknives as well as swords, axes as well as hammers, Marthas as well as Marys, Peters as well as Johns,” wrote J. C. Ryle.²⁷ Though we’ll struggle with many challenges and experience much discomfort along the way, we ought to press on, always remembering what the church is going to be some day—a bride adorned for her husband, without spot or wrinkle. “The church shall survive the world, and be in bliss when that is in ruins,” wrote Matthew Henry. “When men are projecting the church’s ruin, God is preparing for its salvation.”²⁸

Finally, before we complain about the messiness of the church’s building site, we should think about the growing process of every believer. Isn’t every one of us under construction? Some of us aren’t very impressive yet; we have a long way to go. Our faith, which may be true faith, is not very strong. But little strings are needed as much as big strings in God’s concert of grace. “Christians in concert are an abridgment of heaven, shining like a firmament of bright stars,” George Swinnock wrote.²⁹

The work of the church may be small in our eyes, but it is Christ’s work and it will abide forever. As builder and maker, God will not rest until His city is complete. The church chosen from eternity past will glorify the triune God forever. Christ will lose none of those given to Him by the Father, chosen to everlasting life (John 17:12). The church is the only institution in the world that never loses its members, even by death.

One day Christ’s work will also be finished in us, and our Bridegroom will present us to His Father in glory, sanctified and perfected by His work in us. When we pass from the militant to the triumphant church, all sorrow will be forgotten, all sighing will flee, and we will forever praise the Lamb who sits on the throne. As John Murray concluded, “It is both the privilege and obligation of believers to appreciate more and more the complementation of Christ and His church.”³⁰

This complementation is the center of Calvin’s ecclesiology. That’s why his doctrine of the church is so consistent with Christ’s doctrine of the church. Calvin would say to us: Let us embrace a love for the church, for she is the bride of Christ. Let us embrace a love for faithful pulpit ministry, for such preaching is Christ’s speaking to us. Let us embrace a love for sanctification, for holiness fostered in the church greatly honors Christ. And let us embrace these truths under the realization that they are all gifts of Christ to us.

What about you? Do you love the church because you love her Surety, King, and Mediator, and because she is His bride? Let us confess together: I believe there is a holy,

²⁷ Cited in John Blanchard, *Complete Gathered Gold* (Darlington, U.K.: Evangelical Press, 2006), 83.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁰ John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 1:244.

catholic, apostolic, and eternal church, built and maintained by Jesus Christ on the solid rock of Peter's confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). I believe in the perseverance of the saints and of the church because I believe in the perseverance of the Christ of God. I believe that "the church is nothing but Christ displayed," as William Gurnall quipped, and that He will not forsake the work of His own hands.

"Christ is the King of his church, and the church is the greatest queen in the world," said Richard Sibbes.³¹ Let us therefore keep courage and cherish the church for Christ's sake, for she is heir to His cross and His glory. As the Puritan Stephen Marshall concludes:

The glory that He looks for to eternity must arise out of this one work of building Zion; this one work shall be the only monument of His glory to eternity; this goodly world, this heaven and earth, that you see and enjoy the use of, is set up only as a ship, as a workshop, to stand only for a week, for six or seven thousand years; and when His work is done He will throw this piece of clay down again [as] . . . a gourd which springs up in a night and withers in a day; but this piece [His living church] He sets up for a higher end, to be the eternal mansion of His holiness and honor; this is His metropolis, His temple, His house.³²

³¹ Cited in Blanchard, *Complete Gathered Gold*, 88.

³² Cited in I. D. E. Thomas, *The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 58.