

## The Title: The Church

[John Calvin](#)

It is an offense to a great many people that they see almost the whole world opposed to us. And indeed the patrons of a bad cause do not neglect their own advantage, using a stratagem like this so as not to upset the ignorant and weak, that it is extremely absurd that almost the whole Christian world is disregarded, so that the faith is to be possessed by a few men. But, in particular, to destroy us they defend themselves with the sacred title of “the Church” as if with a mallet. But I wish to know how those who are alienated from the gospel by the smallness of our numbers are to preserve their faith against the Turks.

As far as we are concerned, if one man, Noah, condemned all the men of his generation by his faith, there is no reason why a great crowd of unbelievers should move us from our position. At the same time, I say that it is not only hardly a probable, but indeed an unjust and disgraceful, cause of a scandal when regard for men outweighs the Word of God. What then? Will the truth of God not stand unless we have been pleased to put our confidence in men? On the contrary, as Paul says, “Let man remain the liar that he is. Let those to whom God deigns to reveal himself, know that he is true” (Rom. 3:4). And we have already shown elsewhere why the majority of men are so reluctant about yielding themselves in obedience to God. Therefore, when the world shows such obstinacy it is by no means appropriate that our faith be directed according to the example of the multitude. Moreover, the sign is given by Christ, “where the eagles gather together there the body is” (Matt. 24:28). I do not deny indeed that if all the eagles ever gathered together in one place, the conversion of the whole world is to be looked for at once. But since Christ is not meaning there all eagles in general, but those which follow the life-giving odor of his death, who does not see that the expression must be restricted to a few men? If anyone perhaps objects that we are not excused by the example of Noah, if we separate ourselves from that crowd which keeps the name of “the Church,” Isaiah, when he gave orders to abandon the conspiracy of men and follow God alone, was referring not to strangers but to those who were at that time glorying exceedingly in the name of the people of God (Isa. 8:12). And when Peter compares the Church to the ark, because in a perishing world a small company of men is saved as if through a flood, he is giving warning enough that we must not be dependent on the multitude (I Pet. 3:20ff.). Why then does it please wretched men to grasp at the chance of staggering and tottering in the changeable breezes of the world when God makes us firm on the eternal foundation of his Word? Why do they prefer to be tossed about in the midst of the storms of opinions rather than lie quietly in the safe harbor of certain truth, where God invites us?

Yet the highest reverence is due to the Church. Of course I agree; and I am glad to add also that the idea of the Church is so connected with the genuine doctrine of the law and gospel that it is deservedly called the faithful guardian and interpreter of it. But this is the difference between us and the papists. They think that the Church is “the pillar of the truth” (I Tim. 3:15), just as if it controls the Word of God. On the other hand, we assert that the truth is possessed by the Church and handed down to others because it subjects itself reverently to the Word of God. Accordingly, the Word of God has no more authority among them than the Church allows it, as if by favor, and they alter the interpretation of the whole of Scripture according to the judgment of the Church, just as the old proverb tells that the Lesbians were once accustomed to shaping stone according to their leaden rule. Therefore, there is no passage of Scripture so clear that, bent or, to speak more correctly, distorted according to this Lesbian rule, does not assume another form.

Yet it is not here that we are engaged in the most important struggle. But after the papists have set up the Church on the throne of Christ, so that it establishes religion by its own authority, and makes judgments on Scripture without challenge, they then seize that right, whatever it is, for themselves. Indeed, because it is as easy as it is dangerous to be deceived in this matter, we wish that it be determined which is the true Church. It is certainly no new thing for those who take charge in the office of pastor sometimes to be “cruel wolves” (Acts 20:29), and for those who have customary power in their hands to be ungodly and treacherous betrayers of God and the Church. Why then do lifeless specters frighten us away from investigating, as is proper, whether what is called “the Church” is truly the Church? Paul says that the Church is “the pillar of the truth” (I Tim. 3:15), but he also predicts the rebellion of the already converted world and the open reign of Antichrist in the temple of God (II Thess. 2:4). It is known well enough that he had to undergo the same struggles by which we are exercised today, when the Jews, taking pride in the name of “the Church,” were loud in their complaints that he was both an apostate and the cause of schisms and disturbances.

They boast that they are descended in continuous succession all the way from the apostles themselves, doubtless just as Caligula and Nero succeeded Valerius Publicola and Lucius Brutus! For they connect themselves to the apostles in this way, as if there had not intervened the immense chaos of disagreement which broke off whatever links there ever were. Because the dregs of the Roman clergy are against us, they intend us to feel as annoyed by that precedent as if the angels condemned us out of heaven. Of course, the scribes once repudiated Christ with the same contempt because none of the rulers and the Pharisees had believed in him. And indeed it is no wonder that those men rant on with empty sounds, since they are determined to fight stubbornly right to the bitter end on behalf of their own tyranny, and that they are destitute of genuine grounds. But I wish all those who regard it as a scandal that the name of “the Church” has been falsely appropriated to be asked to bear to open their ears and eyes at last, so that the deceptive representation of the body may not tear them away from the head, so that the prostitute, embellished with the adornments of a bride, may not rob them of Christ, the bridegroom. For I beseech you, what marks do they have from which they may recognize the Church of Christ in the entire crowd of the Roman Antichrist? Unless

perhaps when they see the Pope arrayed in white and a cross reaching to his feet, cardinals clothed in purple, bishops conspicuous with mitre and crosier, and the remainder — the lesser crowd — distinct in their own insignia also, they are content with these tokens and have no great desire for any other church than the one appearing in theatrical displays.

For what else is left to be said to those worthless fellows who, having been refuted so often and so severely and fully by us, yet still continue to arrogate the title of “the Church” to themselves. I said at the beginning that almost the only people who are deceived in this connection are those who are unwilling to give their assent to Christ and make far-fetched obstacles for themselves. There was indeed a time when this difficulty hindered many simple and pious souls, but I maintain that today not a few oppose sound doctrine with a stumbling block from the name of “the Church” so as to insult Christ maliciously and proudly. The same kind of impudence causes them to press for miracles, so that, having been reduced to astonishment by them, they may be forced at last to yield to God speaking through us. In fact, I say that while our doctrine offers clear-shining evidence for itself, it has been established by all the miracles which have appeared since the foundation of the world; and since those men who have forgotten the ancient miracles to gape at new ones are so dumbfounded at the open power of God, and blind in the clear light of day, I maintain that they are monstrosities, just as if we were to see a man turned into an animal.

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