

The Church and the Truth

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THE CHURCH AND THE TRUTH

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin teaches that the first and foremost mark of the true church is faithfulness to the Word of God. Adherents of the Reformed faith have ever taken the same position. If that position is correct, the relationship of the church to the truth of God's special revelation must of necessity be exceedingly close. As a matter of fact it is so close that to do full justice to it is next to impossible. The following paragraphs will indicate that relationship from a few of its many angles.

PRODUCT OF THE TRUTH

The church was brought into being by the revelation of truth.

When man fell into sin in the garden of Eden, God at once appeared on the scene. He pronounced judgment on the man and the woman as well as the serpent. But He also gave to fallen humanity a promise which has come to be known as the protevangelium, the first announcement of the gospel. Said God to the serpent: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). That promise spoke of the victory of Christ crucified over Satan, sin and the world. It may be taken for granted that Adam and Eve embraced it in faith. If so, they constituted the first Christian church, for the church consists of the believers of all ages.

In the days of Abraham God established His church in a more formal way, and again He did it by the revelation of truth. His numerous revelations to Abraham culminated in the promise: "I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee" (Genesis 17:7). Abraham believed and became "the father of all them that

believe" (Romans 4:11), whether of the old or the new dispensation. Collectively they constitute the church of God.

The church in its New Testament aspect was founded when the Holy Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost. Numerous souls were added to the church from every part of the inhabited world. That also came to pass through the revelation of truth, particularly through the inspired preaching of the apostle Peter.

From the fall of man to the end of time God builds His church. And His invariable method of doing it is by His Word of truth and the Spirit of truth. The Heidelberg Catechism says: "The Son of God, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers . . . to Himself by His Spirit and Word, out of the whole human race, a church chosen to everlasting life" (Lord's Day XXI, Question 54).

Surely, the church is a product of the truth.

CONVEYOR OF THE TRUTH

On rare occasions God has used angels to convey His truth to men. For instance, angels first proclaimed the Saviour's birth and His resurrection. Ordinarily, however, God has reserved this honor for human beings

The men whom God employed as conveyors of the truth in the old dispensation are commonly called prophets. It has been said aptly that their task was not so much to foretell as to forth-tell. God first spoke to them and then they told men what God had told them. They were God's messengers to men. Therefore they did not present their own opinions but declared authoritatively: "Thus saith the Lord." That expression or its equivalent actually occurs hundreds of times in their writings. Peter tells us: "The prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (II Peter 1:21).

The men through whom God conveyed His truth in the new dispensation are known as apostles. They were instructed in the truth by the Lord as they walked with Him during His public ministry. When He was about to leave, He promised them "another Comforter . . . even the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16, 17). Controlled by this Spirit, they, too, proclaimed not their own wisdom but the wisdom of God. When the apostle Paul came on the scene as one born out of due season, he certified that the gospel which he preached was not after man and that he had not received it of man but was taught it by the revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11, 12). All the books of the New Testament were written either by the apostles themselves or by others under their guidance or influence.

Not every one whom the Bible calls a prophet or an apostle was a true child of God. Balaam, for instance, was not, nor was Judas Iscariot. Nevertheless, the prophets and apostles by and large bore the closest relationship to the church of God. They were

members of the church. They constituted the foundation of the church, and the foundation is an integral part of a building. By virtue of their office they represented the church. Therefore it may be asserted without hesitation that God has been pleased to employ His church as the conveyor of special revelation.

CUSTODIAN OF THE TRUTH

To the church of the old dispensation “were committed the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2). Its task was the keeping, the guarding, the conserving of special revelation. That such is likewise the task of the church of the new dispensation is unmistakably explicit in Paul’s description of the church as “the pillar and ground of the truth” (I Timothy 3:15). The function of pillars is to uphold structures. One important function of the ground is to uphold numberless things. If the earth failed to perform that task, this planet would obviously be chaos. The function of the church as the pillar and ground of the truth is to uphold the truth.

There have been times in the history of the church when it took that task seriously. During the first centuries of the Christian era and again in the age of the Protestant Reformation the church was much more concerned about the truth than about its own immediate peace and prosperity. The truth was dearer to the hearts of men than were their possessions, their lives, even their wives and children. In comparison, how sad is the church’s plight today! The cancer of doctrinal indifference is gnawing at its vitals. The insistent and wide-spread demand for church union and the truly tremendous emphasis on ecumenism are in many instances symptoms of that disease. And instead of casting out deniers of such cardinal Christian truths as the Holy Trinity, the deity of Christ and the substitutionary atonement, the church often bestows upon them its highest honors. Thus it has come to pass that in numerous instances the church, having ceased to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints, has ceased being the church.

Will the church pass out of existence and the truth fail? No, never! The Spirit of truth will abide with and in the church forever (John 14:16). One denomination after another may become a false church, but there will always be a remnant according to the election of grace. The pillar and ground of the truth cannot be destroyed. Not even the gates of hell surpass it in strength. God Almighty Himself will see to it that His church continues to the end of time as custodian of the truth. Martin Luther was right when he sang:

**And though this world with devils filled
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.**

INTERPRETER OF THE TRUTH

Rome teaches that special revelation is not complete in the Bible and that it is the church's task and privilege to add to it. Therefore it places the teachings of the church on a par with — and sometimes above — Holy Scripture. It is as certain of the immaculate conception of the virgin Mary and her assumption into heaven, neither of which has the slightest basis in Scripture, as it is of the unmistakably Scriptural teachings of the virgin birth of Jesus and His ascension. The Protestant Reformers rejected this view of revelation as grievous heresy and insisted on the sufficiency of Scripture. At the same time they strongly stressed the duty of the church to *interpret* the Word of God. How right they were! In order that the church may rightly divide His Word, God has given to it the Spirit of truth.

Some Protestants of the Reformation age stressed the individual believer's right of private interpretation out of all proportion to the church's function of interpreting the Word of God. But most of the Reformers had the good sense, while insisting on the right of private interpretation, to hold high the honor of the church as divinely appointed interpreter of Holy Writ.

How the churches of the Reformation worked at that task! The energy displayed by them in its performance was truly prodigious. Numerous confessions and catechisms were the result. And almost all of them are masterpieces of Scripture interpretation.

Today there are a few Christians — very few in fact — who regard the creeds as practically sacrosanct and hesitate exceedingly either to add to them or to subtract from them. They overlook the fact that the church of all ages must continue active as interpreter of God's truth. All the creeds of Christendom put together do not nearly exhaust the truth of Holy Writ. Nor are they infallible. However, those who hold the creeds in contempt are far more numerous. They are also more vocal. Most modernists laugh the creeds out of court as outdated and outmoded products of "the pre-scientific age," while many fundamentalists keep repeating the vapid phrase "No creed but Christ." Both belittle, not only the church, but a most significant work which the Spirit of truth has accomplished through the church.

PROCLAIMER OF THE TRUTH

The church has no more important task than that of preaching the Word of God.

Some would have the Word preached by individuals rather than the church. There have been in the past, and there are today, evangelists and other preachers so called who have never been ordained to the ministry or sent out by the church. That savors of unwholesome individualism. While no one has the right to say that God will not use the labors of such men, it may be asserted without hesitation that their position is far from ideal. Most assuredly, all Christians must witness for their Lord, but the preaching of the truth of special revelation is the official task of the church. For a bit of Scriptural proof,

were not Paul and Barnabas sent out as missionaries by the church of Antioch with the laying on of hands, and did not that church send them out at the express command of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1-3)?

How stupendous a task is preaching! Not only isolated portions of the Bible but “all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) must be declared. Preaching involves both explanation and application of the Word of God. And the Word must be applied, not merely to the needs of the individual hearers, but to all those social problems that have a religious import. The truth of God must be proclaimed to all men: to those who are rich and to those who are afar off, to rulers and subjects, to rich and poor, to adults and children, to the learned and the ignorant, to the cultured and the uncultured, to the converted and the unconverted, to men of every race, nation and language. That stupendous task the exalted Christ has committed to His church. And on its performance hangs the salvation of the world.

Much more might be said on our theme, but enough has been said to make it clear that the relationship of the church to the truth is exceedingly intimate. Some conclusions are now in order.

The church that has grown indifferent to the truth is, to put it mildly, on its way out. And the church that knowingly tolerates in its midst denial of the basic truths of the Word of God is itself guilty of such denial and by that very token has ceased being a true church.

A church with a large membership, an imposing edifice, an elaborate ceremonial, an efficient organization and dignified vestments, but without the truth, is not a church. On the other hand, a church with a numerically negligible membership, with no building other than a lean-to, with the simplest order of worship, with a minimum of organization and with no clerical vestments at all, is a church of Jesus Christ if only it is loyal to the truth.

In this world, which under the spell of the liar from the beginning has become a dark den of falsehood and deception, there is one institution whose sole concern is to hold high the torch of God’s special revelation. That distinction belongs to the Christian church.

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