

Newsletter May 2012

In Book II *Christian Living, Practice, and the Church*, Chapter 11.1, we discuss the Church as having two major attributes. The invisible attribute refers to its unshakable spiritual foundation, while the visible attribute refers to its living body of true believers residing on earth in any age. The Visible Church also has a temporal adjunct, which refers to a political representation purporting to emulate the Visible Church in today's world through a human institution. In this newsletter, we shall briefly examine these two attributes as well as the temporal adjunct using edited excerpts obtained from Chapters 11.1 and 11.3.

We must first come to a basic understanding of the Church as an invisible spiritual entity, which is assembled solely by Christ through the Holy Spirit and is untouched by man's corrupting influence. Her doors are always open to those who love the Lord, and the individual's social standing, personal circumstances, wealth, or geographic location does not restrict her membership in any way. She is never torn by division or strife. She transcends all human error of doctrine and method. Jesus Christ is her exclusive head.

The Jews under the old covenant were God's chosen people. They beheld the glory of God in the Temple; they were informed of God's moral requirements for men in the Decalogue; they were exposed to the grace of God through their sacrificial laws; they were guided and often chastened by God's hand upon them. God's express purpose in choosing the Jews was to provide a nation within whose strict religious framework the Messiah could be manifested. A savior would come from that unique assembly: a savior through whom not only the Jew but also people of all nations on earth could be reconciled to God.

Now that the awaited Messiah, the Christ, has come, God has also chosen a new people that once were not his people (Ro.9:25,26; 1Pe.2:10; Jn.10:16). This speaks of the vast Gentile populations of the world. This new assembly is actually made up of both Jew and Gentile, although the Jew in large part has rejected their Messiah (The relationship between Israel and the Church is fully discussed in Book II, Chapter 11.2). These are a unique people who believe that "Christ Jesus is the Son of God" and depend entirely upon Him for the redemption of their souls. This is not just a simple verbal confession, for in believing this we must also profess inwardly within our hearts and minds the full truth of the Gospel, submitting ourselves to God — fully trusting Him for everything, which we cannot in any way do for ourselves. Jesus said that He would build his Church upon "this rock" of Truth, trust, and faith (Mt.16:18).

Roman Catholics in particular have erroneously reckoned Peter to be the "rock" to which Jesus referred, and the Church to be a grandiose political organization of this world under the headship of Peter and his appointed successors (see *Apostolic Succession*, Book III, page 111). However, the "rock" was only revealed within the confession of Peter when he stated that Jesus is the Son of the living God; furthermore, we see that Peter received that knowledge by revelation directly from the Father not from his own intellect (Mt.16:17). Many others have erroneously thought that the "rock" merely referred to the spoken "confession of Peter," and that the Church was to be built upon an oral repetition of this confession by other men and women over time.

However, it is important to realize that the "rock" supports the entire foundation of apostolic truth written in the Bible of which the singular source and object is Jesus Christ. Peter's confession only served to reveal that fact as the Holy Spirit opened his mind to the truth of Jesus' deity. The foundation of the Christian faith is the teaching of all the apostles as well as the earlier old covenant prophets with Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone that anchors it all together (Ep.2:20; 1Pe.2:6-8). It is very important to realize that this firm foundation is not built upon a man or men, not upon Peter or even upon all of the apostles

together. That foundation is built upon the Word of God in Christ that was revealed to all the apostles and is now found written down for our edification in Holy Scripture (cf. Ga.1:11,12).

Therefore, Jesus Himself is the “rock,” the cornerstone of the Church, which unites and anchors its whole structure into one faith (Mt.21:42). That Church, to which Jesus referred, is a spiritual assembly of the elect who as “living stones” make up the walls of a “building” to the Father both to reveal his glory and to provide a living Temple in which He may dwell. Peter himself said that we “as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house...” (1Pe.2:5). Since spiritual regeneration and belief in Christ is the means by which those “living stones” are to be placed in this “spiritual house,” it is rightly said that Jesus is the living cornerstone of that true Temple that unites the entire foundation of revealed Truth (Ep.2:20;1Pe.2:4).

No longer is the Temple that which was made by the hands of man as in the Old Testament tabernacle on earth, but it is a supernatural spiritual structure — patterned and built by God in Heaven (cf. He.9:11). We find that we become a part of this Temple, this house of God, by a faith that is received through the revelation of Jesus Christ to our hearts and minds from the Holy Spirit when He comes to dwell within us. We truly become God’s household both as individual members and collectively as the Church. Therefore, we must realize that the true Church is not a worldly organization brought into existence by man, with its wood, stone or steel buildings, a system of rules and membership roles, but it is completely spiritual in its construction, and it is manifested on earth only in the hearts and minds of believing men and women (cf. Jn.4:21,23).

The Invisible Church is universal in character; its members are not all of one race, nationality, or color. We plainly see in the Scriptures that first many Jews were called and then the Gentiles were brought in in great numbers, and that no distinction was made because of race, nationality, or color of skin. Nor, is it made up of only the socially acceptable or men of power and wealth. It is universally open to all who come to the knowledge and acceptance of the Gospel of Truth. When God calls us, it does not matter whether our earthly circumstances have made us rich or have reduced us to the poverty of a street bum. We were all equally lost in sin and in need of redemption. Therefore, what God has chosen to call clean is clean indeed (cf. Ac.10:15)! Moreover, we find that we are universally joined to all the saints whose bodies now rest in their graves awaiting the resurrection as well as many men and women that God may yet call into his Church in the future.

The Invisible Church is also universal in the sense that it is singular. That is to say, there is only one Church, for there is only one Christ! Jesus personally knows those that are the members of his true Church; they are those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life that resides with the Father in Heaven (Ph.4:3;Re.3:5). Entry into this one and only universal Church is by means of a baptism of the Holy Spirit through which we are born again from above to a new spiritual life (cf. Mt.3:11; Jn.3:5). For, by the inward joining of the Spirit of Christ with our spirit, we become one with Him. Indeed, we are so immersed in the Holy Spirit that we are inseparable from Jesus and fully identified with Him before the Father as well. We are immediately made members of a spiritual fellowship — an assembly made up of individuals that Christ Himself has called forth as his veritable body on earth, the Church. “For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones” (Ep.5:30). This aspect of the Invisible Church can be properly referred to as the “Visible Church,” inasmuch as living members of the true Invisible Church are real flesh-and-blood people that are fully visible in this age.

While the spiritual and physical are distinct from each other in the same sense that the body and the spirit of man are distinct, it is impossible to totally separate the two here on

earth. Even as we must carefully examine our own personal lives, we must also examine our corporate religious life to be sure that we are worshiping and engaging in fellowship in a manner consistent with God's will for the body of Christ, the Church. We must understand that we shall always fall short because of our human frailty, our remaining bent toward sin, and Satan working through the forces of the world about us. That is why it is so important to be able to cling to the Invisible Church as a substantive, enduring, and present spiritual entity that God has founded for us that we may safely reside within the glory of its everlasting walls. Therefore, we find that even the Visible Church is a purely supernatural structure of which we are each and all members, as many as have truly accepted Christ into their hearts, totally apart from any earthly denominational or local church affiliation.

Throughout this work, we have used the term "temporal church" when it applies to political church organizations, whether we mean an independent local assembly, or a large denomination composed of subordinate local assemblies. The term "temporal church" is a more appropriate term to use than Visible Church when describing our earth-bound and time-bound institutions because they inevitably contain large numbers of persons who are not members of the Visible Church. While many members of the Visible Church do attend and even become members of various temporal churches, they quite often do not make up a majority, and in some temporal churches, they are in the extreme minority or even nonexistent. Therefore, worldly infiltration by the pseudo-believer into the political representation of the Church on earth makes this distinction between the Visible Church and its temporal adjunct imperative.

In Chapter 11.3 of Book II, we examine in considerable detail various legitimate functions and benefits of the temporal church, its avowed purpose, and its political offices including the qualifications for elders (bishops), and deacons. A temporal church should be a storehouse for the Truth providing a unified witness of it to the world, and it should provide for genuine Christian worship of God as well as true fellowship with Christ and other believers through expository teaching and corporate prayer. This also includes the proper supervision of ritual baptism and the celebration of the Lord's Supper in accordance with Scripture. We also briefly consider basic statements of belief as well as formal creeds¹, and we discuss basic forms of political church government, which vary from one temporal church to another. Although the Visible Church is not divided in any way, we find that the temporal church is disunited by its intrinsic political nature.

Some temporal churches are greatly blessed with a large number of the elect, thus bringing them closer than others to the ideal of the Visible Church in doctrine and practice. Nevertheless, it is apparent that no amount of human effort can make an institutionalized local church or denomination, which is founded and operated by mortal men, fully conform to the ideal of the Visible Church. To believe that any temporal church is the perfect embodiment of the Visible Church on earth in political form is to fall into the trap of Churchianity in which the church is worshiped instead of Christ (see Book II, Section 13). In the last days, when the true Church is lifted off the earth in response to the trumpet shout of Christ (1Th.4:16,17; Book III, page 584), the temporal church that remains on earth will suffer a terrible apostasy of doctrine and practice from which there will be no hope of redemption (see *The Final Apostasy*, Book III, page 533).

Arthur J. Smith, May 2012

¹ In Book III *Pentecost to the Eternal Ages*, the full text of the *Apostles Creed* is discussed on page 108, the *Nicene Creed* on page 158, and the *Athanasian Creed* on page 170. Each is analyzed in an historical context.