

## **The Doctrine of the Church<sup>1</sup>**

**The Foundation of the Church.** The Church is a community planned and created by God, not by man. It is rooted and grounded in God's eternal and loving purpose to redeem men and women and all creation through the sending of his Son Jesus Christ as Saviour of all. That purpose was fulfilled in and through the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and through Pentecost. Through Jesus Christ alone are people of all ages redeemed. As the redeemed people of God, the Church lives, as God's creation, to God's praise and glory.

The Church, as a community, is separate and distinct from every other human community or organisation. It is distinct in that the Lord Jesus Christ lives within the Church, within each believing member. Moses said, "Unless you go with us, what else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:16). It was the Presence of the Lord God living within the midst of Israel that distinguished Israel from every other nation in the world. Likewise, it is the Presence of the crucified and risen Christ living within the Church, which distinguishes the Church from every other community in the world.

**The Church in the Old Testament.** Pentecost is not the birthday of the Church as is so often said. The history of the Church reaches back into the Old Testament era as God called and entered into communion with his people. Abraham is named as the father of all who believe.

At Pentecost the Church was reformed or reshaped. At Pentecost the Church was, as it were, 'born again'.

**The People of God under the Old Covenant.** God gave himself to his people in a covenant of grace, in which he united his people to himself as their God and Saviour. Through the generations he revealed himself to them as they were able to receive and understand him, calling them to himself in obedience, faith and righteousness. Although his covenant of grace and love embraced everyone, he chose Israel so that through them his love and redemption might be revealed and his covenant of grace be fulfilled for all people. He called Israel and separated them unto himself for their sake and in order through them to reveal himself to the world and to redeem the world.

Through God's calling, Israel became a people separated unto God and separate from all the other nations of the world. They were called into being as a community, as a Church, through God's Word. They were the people of God.

At the same time, they were given an ordered life and established as a nation among the peoples of the world. That is, they were called to be both a 'people' (*Iaos*) and also a nation (*ethnos*). Yet as a nation, they could not be a secular nation like the other nations for they were elected to be God's chosen people, the

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bearers of God's Word to the Nations. They were called to be a holy people exercising a vicarious mission for the transforming of the whole human race. No other nation in the world was called to this mission and called to be both a people and a nation. Israel found this to be desperately difficult – and still does!

#### **Israel's four-fold function:**

##### **1. Israel was called to be the chosen people of God.**

God said, "Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession" (Deuteronomy 14:2). God called them for their sake and yet not simply for their sake but for God's sake.

God called them in order in and through them, to reveal himself to the world and to redeem the world.

God did not call Israel because they were more numerous than other nations. He did not call them because they were more righteous. They were a sinful people, because only as a sinful people would they represent the other sinful nations of the world. Only within a sinful people would God reveal himself as a God of Love, of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, determined, in spite of sin, to redeem both Israel and the world.

The sign of God's covenant with Israel was circumcision. The fact that it was a sign cut into the flesh, that could not be removed, was a sign that despite God's holiness and despite Israel's sin, God would never let them go in his love and determination to redeem them and the world.

##### **2. Israel was called to be a prophet to the nations.**

To them was committed the "oracles of God" (Romans 3:2) and the promises of the Messiah (Romans 9:4,5). They were also given the many laws of worship which although temporary, helped them and ultimately the nations, to understand the Incarnation of Christ and his atonement, which Christ would accomplish not only for them but for the world.

As a prophet, Israel was called not simply to be a bearer of the Word but a witness to the Word in her life and being and in all that happened to her and within her. To be a prophet, the Word of God had to penetrate and reshape the entire life and understanding of Israel. The very fact that circumcision was cut into her flesh testified to the fact that the Word of God had to penetrate and take possession of her entire being.

In that context, we are given, through Israel, the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

##### **3. Israel was called to be the servant of the Lord.**

In this capacity Israel was called to fulfil a vicarious mission for the redemption of the world. Israel was called to obey and embrace the Word entrusted to her

with all her heart and mind and soul, that is, (as we have said) with her whole being. She was called to be holy as God is holy. There was laid on her through the Word, as Israel found in her agony, a burden and responsibility that was greater than that which was laid on any other nation. For no other nation was entrusted with 'the oracles of God'. Israel was called, in her weakness and sin, as a representative nation, representative of all the nations. Any falling short of God's requirement would and did encounter the judgement of God. God's judgement begins at the house of God. Hence, Israel suffered more than any other nation and in her suffering demonstrated the nature and requirements of God.

Israel's sin (as we have said) was no greater than that of any other nation. Her sin demonstrated the holiness and judgement of God and above all the mercy of God. It demonstrated to Israel and to the nations, God's faithfulness to his covenant of Grace and his determination to redeem both Israel and the world.

It is important that a large part of the Old Testament, written for our redemption, is a direct result of Israel's sin.

#### **4. Israel was called to be the bearer of the Messiah.**

In the account of the birth of Jesus given to us in Revelation chapter 12, the woman clothed with the sun who gave birth to a male child, was Israel. The Child was the Messiah, Jesus Christ. As Jesus said, "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). Israel was not simply a people and a nation entrusted with the Word and promises of God. God had made an everlasting covenant with them, binding them to himself in a covenant which can never be broken. "I bound the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to me", declares the Lord, "to be my people for my renown and praise and honour" (Jeremiah 13:11). Through that union and the Word of God that was given to her, Israel carried within her womb the seed of the Messianic Saviour. Through all her suffering she was preserved from extinction through God's faithfulness and her union with Christ. She was preserved that the Saviour might be born, preserved for her and the world's redemption.

Put that in another way. Through the Word of God pressing into the inner life and being of Israel, seeking to become flesh, we have the preparation for the Incarnation, when the Son of God became flesh in the Man Jesus Christ. In becoming flesh, The Word of God, Jesus, gathered up and fulfilled all that went before.

Israel of the Old Covenant was gathered up in Christ, with the church of the Gentiles, to become what Paul calls "one new man" (Ephesians 2:15), "the Israel of God" (Galatians 3:22), the universal body of Christ.

From what I have said it should be clear that the history of Israel is not just history prior to the Incarnation. It is of vital importance. It is preparation for the Incarnation and important for our understanding of Christ, our understanding of the atonement, reconciliation and the New Testament Church.

**The church in the New Covenant.** Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). The devout in Israel had longed for the coming of the kingdom with the Person of the Messiah. It was the centre of their hopes. In the Person of Jesus Christ the kingdom of God had finally broken into this world. In him the kingdom would become flesh and blood. It would become grounded on this earth, as Jesus gathered around him men and women who received him in faith. The fulfilment of the kingdom, although embracing the devout of Israel, would transcend the boundaries of old Israel as it reached out to embrace the peoples of the whole world.

**The transition from the old to the new covenant only through the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.** Jesus fulfilled all that went before and established the kingdom in his own person through his life, death and resurrection. This means that people could only enter the kingdom through union with Christ and through union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Israel, the church of God in the Old Testament was concluded under sin along with the whole Gentile world. Israel as such had to die, as we all have to die in order to rise to the new life in union with Christ in his kingdom. The structures, institutions, boundaries of old Israel had to be transformed as the church reached out in the risen Christ to embrace all people. The devout, believing remnant within Israel did die with Christ and rose to become, along with Gentile believers, the Church of the New Covenant, the Israel of God. The Gentile believers were in Christ grafted into the original trunk (Romans 11:16f).

Gentile believers have ever to remind themselves that they have no independent existence, independent from the original trunk. Equally the Church must never forget that God’s election and promises embraced all Israel, something which is not true of any other nation. We await not simply the fulfilment of the spiritual but also the material, physical promises to Israel, although we have the beginning of that fulfilment in our day, with the gathering of Israel back to the Promised Land. Paul anticipated that one day all Israel would be saved (Romans 11:26). That has not yet taken place. Through the centuries the church has failed to recognise, to her own loss, God’s continuing covenant of grace with the Jewish People. The Church today (certainly in the West) fails for the most part to recognise that God continues through Israel to challenge and confront the nations, for their salvation.

**The Church’s ministry grounded on Jesus’ ministry.** In so far as Jesus fulfilled and established the kingdom in his own Person and through what he did, the Church, in entering the kingdom through union with Christ in his death to sin and resurrection into life, must be guided and controlled by Christ and the Holy Spirit in all things. The church’s ministry is grounded on Jesus’ ministry. Jesus in humble, patient service preached the Gospel of the kingdom, called people to repentance, endeavoured to save the lost, forgave sins, healed the sick and fed the hungry, prayed constantly to the Father. The church must do likewise. What Jesus did on earth he seeks to continue to do today through his church. There is only one ministry, the ministry of the risen, exalted Christ. The church

is called to share in that one ministry through the Holy Spirit. Only as the church is true to Christ's ministry will the church prosper. The church has no ministry of her own separate from that of Christ's ministry. The only ministry is that of Jesus Christ. The church has no independent existence, life or power apart from what is communicated to her through union with the crucified and risen Christ and through the Holy Spirit. How often the church seems to have forgotten this and has launched forth on her own, drawing up plans for renewal and seeking to persuade the world with human wisdom and in ways, which are not given to us in Scripture?

**Jesus' self-witness.** Jesus Christ is God. He came to reveal God, the Father Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). He is the Saviour of the world. In his Person and in what he did, through his life, death, resurrection and ascension, he is the resurrection and giver of eternal life. Wherefore, he witnessed to himself. His witness as Divine was confirmed by miraculous signs and wonders. Jesus said, "Even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 10:38). These miracles testified to the fact that God was present in the Person of Jesus and in all that he said and did.

**Jesus' self-witness transferred to the Apostles.** To create the Church so that the Church, after Christ's ascension, should be able to witness to God as Jesus did, that self-witness of Christ had to be translated to the Church. It had as it were to become flesh and blood in the Church. For that purpose Jesus chose twelve disciples. These were people who had been with Jesus throughout his ministry from his Baptism to his death on the cross and were eye-witnesses of his resurrection and ascension. Later they were called Apostles. Jesus made them, through the Holy Spirit his ambassadors, his personal representatives.

**Meaning of *Shaliach*.** An Apostle (Hebrew *shaliach*) is a personal representative of someone who has been sent to represent the sender in what he or she says and does. The personal representative is looked upon, or regarded as if he or she was the sender and what he or she says and does, as if they were the words and actions of the sender.

**Jesus Christ is the unique ambassador and representative of God, in all that God says and does.** Jesus is God himself in action.

Jesus Christ does not just speak the word about God. He is in himself the Word of God, through whom and by whom all things were created. He is the Word, which God speaks and is immediately actualised. In Jesus Christ God's Word and deed are identical. When he speaks, what is spoken becomes event. When Christ said a person was forgiven, they were in fact forgiven by God. When Christ said a person was healed, they were in fact healed by God. The miraculous events which accompanied Jesus' ministry confirmed that Jesus was and is the creative Word and power of God. This is supremely manifest in the cross and resurrection.

**The Holy Spirit is the unique ambassador and representative of Christ.** God, the Holy Spirit is Jesus' other self but distinct from Jesus. As the Divine representative of Christ he does not speak about himself but about Jesus Christ, his Person and saving work. Through the Holy Spirit Christ himself speaks and acts with power.

**The Holy Spirit and the Apostles.** When the ascended Christ and the Father gave the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, so Jesus himself came to live within them. They through the Holy Spirit were given Jesus' self-witness, to his Person and saving work. They did not witness to themselves or to their experiences, they witnessed to Christ. The Holy Spirit was witnessing to Christ in and through them. The power and authority of their witness were that of Christ. As they witnessed to Christ, so Jesus himself through the Holy Spirit actively, powerfully witnessed to himself and his saving work.

That is to say, the Apostles did not re-interpret the story of the life, teaching and work of Christ. They did not in their witness invent mythical stories and seek to enhance Jesus' ministry, as so much modern scholarship has suggested. Their witness was Christ's own witness. When they spoke, Jesus himself was speaking. The risen ascended Christ was continuing his witness through the Apostles by means of his Holy Spirit. The signs and wonders which accompanied their preaching testified to the fact that the risen, ascended Christ was present and actively at work in and through the Apostles. Luke having written, in the Gospel that bears his name, an account of all that "Jesus began to do and teach", in the Acts of the Apostles, wrote about what the Risen, ascended Christ continued to do through his Apostles.

**The Apostolic witness is the foundation of the Church.** The Holy Spirit was given to the Church and is given to all who believe in the Lord. We today receive the Holy Spirit in something of the same way as did the first Apostles. We encounter Christ today, through the New Testament, through the Holy Spirit as did the Apostles. Theirs however was a unique and foundational encounter with the Lord. The revelation given to them as Christ gave himself to be known and understood, was a final and unrepeatable revelation. They were the eye-witnesses of his life, death, resurrection and ascension. The Church is forever dependent on the witness of the Apostles, spoken and written. The Church is built on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets. It is through them and their witness that the Holy Spirit speaks and operates today in the Church.

**The New Testament is the written testimony of the Apostles.** Christ spoke through them and they wrote with the authority of the Holy Spirit, with the authority of Christ. Other writings by other people, however helpful do not carry the same authority, as does the New Testament. The Church is altogether dependent on the New Testament (the authoritative witness of the Apostles) – and on the Old Testament as the writings of the prophets, whom the rabbis often called 'Apostles', 'ambassadors' *sheluchim*. The Church is also dependent on the sacraments which belong to the special apostolic witness and are what the Reformers called "the visible Word

## **The Church is the body of Christ.**

The New Testament uses the expression “body of Christ” in two ways, both of which are important for our understanding of the Church:

1. The Church is the new man who is Christ, in whom the people of God are given life.

Christ includes the Church, in whom the whole fullness of God lives. He is the true vine that includes the branches (See Eph 2:15; Rom 5:12ff; 1 Cor 15:45f; Col 1:18f; John 15:1f). It is in this sense that Christ is the Church. Christ identified himself with us. He gathered us and all who believe into union and communion with himself. He is our life. We have no life on our own apart from him. On the other hand, in saying that “Christ is the Church” we cannot say “the Church is Christ”. For Christ is infinitely more and in himself far transcends the Church, although he has chosen to unite the Church forever to himself.

2. The Church is the body of which Christ is the head (Col 1:18, 2:19; Eph 4: 15-16).

The distinguishing of the body from the head, emphasise the fact that the Church is utterly dependent on the Head for life and everything. The Church is nothing without Christ, although the Lord freely and lovingly bestows on the Church his own royal heritage as the Son of God (see T.F. Torrance, *Atonement*.<sup>2</sup>). As Paul said, “from him the whole body, joined and held together, by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:16).

It is only through participating in Christ through his Holy Spirit that the Church can be known as the body of Christ, his living image on earth, his witness, his instrument for the salvation of men and women. The Church is the earthen vessel which through Grace is made to hold all the treasures of God which are in Christ Jesus.

The Scriptures use other names and images to speak of the Church, all of which are important in helping us to understand the nature and meaning of the church. These two ways, however, are of special significance and are the most Christological. They help us to focus not on the church, the body, but on Jesus Christ who is the essence of the Church. For only in Christ is the church Church.

## **The Doctrine of the Church.**

1. **The Church is part of faith in the Gospel.**

In declaring our faith in the words of the Apostles’ creed, we say “I believe in the Holy Ghost; The Holy Catholic Church; The communion of saints; The forgiveness of sins; The resurrection of the body; And the life everlasting”. Our

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<sup>2</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Atonement*, edited by R.T. Walker, Paternoster, UK 2009 & IVP, USA 2009, Vol.II, p. 362.

confession of faith in the “Catholic Church” is bracketed along with our faith in the Holy Ghost, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. That declares that the doctrine of the Church belongs to the doctrines of saving faith. It is not something extra. It is not something marginal. It is of supreme importance. It belongs inseparably to our faith in the Triune God and his work of salvation in Christ

In this declaration we are declaring that there is only one Catholic or universal Church within which Christ lives and works for the redemption of the world.

## **2. The Church is the creation and work of the three divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, in love purposed and brought about the salvation of the world. Throughout his ministry Jesus stressed that he and the Father were one. He did nothing without the Father. What he did the Father did. Paul said, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (that is, Christ); and through him to reconcile to himself all things , whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col 1:20).

The Church is rooted in Christ, in his life, death, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost. In Christ was the whole fullness of God and the full outpouring of God’s life. And all that Christ did was in the power of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was the gift of the Father and the Son.

The Church lives through communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit the Church shares in the consubstantial union of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is wonderfully brought out in our Lord's High Priestly prayer in John 17. As Christ lives within the Church, his body, through the Holy Spirit, so the whole fullness of the Triune God lives within the Church. Only in that communion does it live and grow.

### **The Attributes of the Church.**

The attributes of the true Church are, and can only be, the attributes of Jesus Christ. Christ is the church. The Church is his body on earth.

#### **1. The holiness of the Church.**

The Apostles’ creed speaks of “the Holy Catholic Church”. God is holy. Christ is holy. In so far as Christ lives within the Church so the Church is holy. The holiness of the Church is due to its participation in the unique holiness of God, of Jesus Christ.

#### **2. The second attribute of the Church, described in the Apostles’ Creed, is that of catholicity, namely, “I believe in the Holy Catholic (or universal) Church”.**



There can only be one Church, which is the body of Christ. Unity and holiness belong to the heart and essence of the true Church. The church is the universal family of God, embracing people of all nations and all ages.

The oneness of the Church derives from the Triunity of God. It does not derive from any human source. It is a gift of God's grace. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is one God so there is, and can be, only one holy fellowship of love in the Church, the counterpart on earth to the unity in God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Our Reformed Fathers spoke of the marks of the church, the Word of God purely preached, the sacraments rightly administered and godly discipline. These are important in helping us to discern the true Church. They describe but do not define the true Church. They are not its essence. It is holiness, catholicity and apostolicity which are attributes that help us to discern the presence of Christ.

3. The Church is **the community of those reconciled to God** in Christ through the Holy Spirit and reconciled one to one another.

Christ lives within those who, through the Holy Spirit and through faith, share in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Those who are in Christ reconciled to God the Father. They are his sons and daughters and heirs in Christ of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Church, the family of God, the body of Christ is the community of those who are reconciled to God in Christ.

In their union in Christ they are, through the Holy Spirit, reconciled one to another. We cannot be reconciled to God without being reconciled to others, no matter who that other is. For the Church to be divided and for the Church to allow divisions to take place within her, is to contradict its own life and existence. It is to call into question its reconciliation in Christ and to act a lie against the atonement. A disunited Church is an attack on Christ.

4. The Church is a **community of love**.

As the Church is the community of those reconciled to God and to one another in Christ, so it is the community of love. God is love. His love has been poured out on the world and on the Church in love. As Christ lives within the Church so the Church, lives and serves in Love.

The Church that lives and serves in love lives in God and God in it (1 John 4:8f,12f,16).

Without love the Church cannot please God, serve God or grow in Grace, in union with Christ.

5. The Church on earth is **united with the Church in heaven**.

God's people, the Church are centred and grounded in Christ. Christ rose from the dead, ascended and ever lives and reigns. To his people who know and love him, he gives eternal life. Jesus said, "I give them eternal; life, and they shall

never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:29). The Church embraces all who love the Lord today, together with all who have passed on to be with the Lord. The Church on earth is united with the Church in heaven.

### **The Life and Mission of the Church.**

The Church shares, or participates through the Holy Spirit, in the mission of Christ. On the evening of the first day of Resurrection Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room, ““Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you”. And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven”” (John 20:21-23).

The Church’s mission is Christ’s mission. There is no other mission. Christ came, sent by the Father, giving himself and his all in love, for the salvation of men and women. The Church is called to do likewise in Christ. Christ alone is the Redeemer of the world. The Church is called in love, in prayer to seek to bring all people to Christ in order to participate in his salvation. The Church’s one concern is Christ and the salvation of the world in Christ.

The Church is sent out by Christ to be the image of Christ in human society, to express and hold Christ forth before all, so that all might see Christ and be saved. Christ had received all power in heaven and on earth. It is with that power he sent out his Church equipping his followers with the Holy Spirit. All his followers are commissioned to exercise a ministry of witness and reconciliation according to the gifts sent down upon them.

The Church’s ministry is correlative to the ministry of Christ and yet different. Christ is king and Lord. The Church is his servant commissioned, in obedience, to announce the good news of salvation and call people to Christ. The Church is the body, Christ is the Head.

The whole life and mission of the Church is inseparably bound up with its function in serving the Gospel of Christ. It is in that service that the Church, the body of Christ is built up and “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

**Preaching Christ.** From what has been said it should be clear that the Church’s ministry is not to draw attention to itself, to its own concerns and welfare, but to draw attention to Christ. The Church must continually die to itself that it may live unto Christ and forever, at all times point people beyond itself to Christ.

The Church, in dependence on the Holy Spirit, must preach the Person of Christ and his saving work, in such a way that people, in faith, see and encounter Christ and are brought to receive his salvation. The Church must proclaim why Christ came into the world, announcing the good news of his incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension. It must announce the Good News of Pentecost, that Christ’s salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit is for all. The

Church's task is to present Christ the Redeemer and to call on the people of the world to repent, believe, receive Christ as Saviour and to live to his glory.

Sadly, the vast majority of the Church's sermons are "telling people what to do", whereas most people probably know what to do and do not know how to do! The Church's task is to present Christ to the world in all his love and saving power. It's task is to awaken the 'dead' by proclaiming the mighty acts of God. It is 'to preach for a verdict'!

**A perennial danger.** Nothing can be worse than the Church drawing attention to itself as if the Church was able to save humanity. Nothing is worse than an individual seeking to take to him or her self, the glory which belongs to God. This undoubtedly has been a temptation which has afflicted the church in all ages. For example in the Medieval Church, with the construction of the Mass as a way of re-offering the death of Christ, of indulgences, the use of relics, etc. That temptation, however, is always with the Church in different forms. It is all too easy to seek, for the Church or for ourselves, the glory that is God's. The Church and we its members are servants, called to be the means through whom Christ may live and speak to the World. Our gifts we hold on trust for the glory of God. We are stewards of the Gospel called, by all that we do and say, to direct people to Christ.

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