

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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ONE HOLY CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH (Part 1)

In C. S. Lewis' little gem of a book, *The Screwtape Letters*, he early on pinpoints one of Satan's favorite tactics: dissatisfaction with the Church and God's people. Screwtape, the senior demon writes these words to Wormwood, "One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like *the body of Christ* and the actual faces in the pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous. At his present stage, you see, he has an idea of *Christians* in his mind which he supposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial. His mind is full of togas and sandals and armour and bare legs and the mere fact that the other people in church wear modern clothes is a real -- though of course an unconscious -- difficulty to him. Never let it come to the surface; never let him ask what he expected them to look like. Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords."¹ Screwtape's advice is sadly being promoted today by the likes of Harold Camping and others.² The run away best-selling "Christian" novel, *The Shack*, heaped disdain on anything and everything remotely associated with the local church. Not to be outdone, the very influential pollster, George Barna, pitched in with a book entitled *Revolution*, where Barna calls upon Christians to become revolutionaries by abandoning the institutional Church and going *solo*, as a new way of "doing church." This approach seeks to customize one's spiritual needs, primarily around the internet, as a new model for a personalized faith experience. Everything is built around the individual. Here is how Barna put it: "The United States is home to an increasing number of revolutionaries. These people are devout followers of Jesus Christ, who are serious about their faith, who are constantly worshipping and interacting with God, and whose lives are centered on their belief in Christ. Some of them are aligned with a congregational church, but many of them are not. The key to understanding revolutionaries is not what church they attend, or even if they attend. Instead, it's their complete dedication to being thoroughly Christian by viewing every moment of life through a spiritual lens and making every decision in light of biblical principles. *These are individuals who are determined to glorify God every day, through every thought, word and deed in their lives*" (p. 8). Elsewhere he noted, "Whether you become a Revolutionary immersed in, minimally involved in, or completely disassociated from a local church is irrelevant to me (and, within boundaries, to God). What matters is not whom you associate with (i.e., a local church), but who you are" (p. 39). According to Barna, the local church is non-

essential. Barna wasn't done. He later co-authored another book with Frank Viola, with this intriguing title, *Pagan Christianity: Exploring Roots of our Church Practices*. Practically everything associated with the local Church is labeled "pagan."³ Thankfully, there are books out there that have responded to this kind of nonsense. One of them, authored by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck made this excellent point. "Church isn't boring because we're not showing enough film clips, or because we play an organ instead of guitar. It's boring because we neuter it of its importance. Too often we treat our spiritual lives like the round of golf used to open George Barna's *Revolution*. At the end of my life, I want my friends and family to remember me as someone who battled for the Gospel, who tried to mortify sin in my life, who fought hard for life, and who contended earnestly for the faith. Not just a nice guy who occasionally noticed the splendor of the mountains God created, while otherwise just trying to enjoy myself, manage my schedule, and work on my short game."⁴

We live in a world that is anything but stable. "The times they are a changing," sang Bob Dylan. All things are indeed subject not only to change but to corruption. Change produces a sense of uncertainty. Ask any sports fan about the effects of free agency in their sport and on their favorite team. They seem to change yearly. Peter Berger, a noted sociologist, has observed how this sense of "homelessness" has affected modern social life, especially as it pertains to religion in America. "The general uncertainty, both cognitive and normative, brought about by the pluralization of everyday life and of biography in modern society, has brought religion into a serious crisis of plausibility. The age-old function of religion – to provide ultimate certainty amid the exigencies of the human condition – has been severely shaken. Because of the religious crisis in modern society, social *homelessness* in the cosmos. This is very difficult to bear. The problem becomes most clearly apparent when one looks at the ancient function of religion which Weber called *theodicy*. This means any explanation of human events that bestows meaning upon the experiences of suffering and evil. Through most of human history, religion provided such theodicies. In one way or another, religion made meaningful even the most painful experiences of the human condition, whether caused by natural or by social agents. Modern society has threatened the plausibility of religious theodicies, but it has not removed the experiences that call for them. Human beings continue to be stricken by sickness and death; they continue to experience social injustice and deprivation. The various secular creeds and ideologies that have arisen in the modern era have been singularly unsuccessful in providing satisfactory theodicies."⁵ There is one thing in this world that will endure the onslaughts of time and the changes it brings. It is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The creed calls it One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. We will examine the language in detail in Part 2. For now, our focus is on the builder. Jesus declared that He will build His church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. That is our text today. Implicit in it are four different things: (1) a building; (2) a builder; (3) a foundation; and (4) a triumphant promise.

- I. ***CHRIST'S BUILDING: "MY CHURCH."*** This building is not made with hands out of wood, brick, stone or steel. It is a company of redeemed sinners who are now called saints. They are the elected of God, the flock of Christ – His bride and His body. This is the holy catholic church. How does a person become a member of *this* church? J. C. Ryle wrote: "The Church which comprises all who repent and believe the Gospel is the Church to which we desire you to belong. Our work is not done, and our hearts are not satisfied, until you are made new creatures, and are members of the one true Church. Outside of this Church, there can be no salvation."⁶
- II. ***CHRIST THE BUILDER: "I WILL BUILD."*** The church is indeed the object of concern and care by all three persons of the Trinity. After all, we are told that God the Father elects and God the Holy Spirit sanctifies *every* member of Christ's body (Ephesians 1:3, 4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). The work of building the church is, however, particularly ascribed to the Lord Jesus Christ. How does Christ go about building His church? Each and every one is given life by Him (John 5:21). He washes away their sin and guilt (Revelation 1:5). He is author and finisher of their faith (Hebrews 12:2). By Him they shall be presented faultless before the throne of the Father (Jude 24; Revelation 14:5). Only the Lord Jesus can build this church. He is the One who oversees this great work of church-building. Despite the failures and glaring faults of Christians down through the ages, Christ will never fail to build his church.

- III. **CHRIST THE FOUNDATION: “UPON THIS ROCK.”** The Roman Catholic Church claims that Christ in Matthew 16:13-19 appointed Peter the first Pope, and that Peter is the rock upon which the church is founded. The language of the text does not support that claim. Christ did *not* say, “You are Peter, and upon you will I build my church.” No, it was not upon the person of Peter but upon the good confession that Peter had just made (Matthew 16:16).⁷ Christ is the rock upon which the church is established (Ephesians 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:4-8 and especially 1 Corinthians 3:11).
- IV. **CHRIST’S CHURCH PRESERVED: “THE GATES OF HADES SHALL NOT PREVAIL.”** There is a very real threat of danger in this text. The “gates of *Hades* (NIV) or *Hell* (KJV) has been interpreted as referring to the power of Satan and the hosts of darkness. This is possible since the word “gates” can refer to fortification (Psalm 127:5) and this implies a distinct enemy and warfare (Ephesians 6:10-18). However, this same expression is also found in Job 38:17; Psalm 107:18 and Isaiah 38:10 and *always* denotes the power of death and the grave.⁸ “The picture that it evokes is one of a fortress or prison with thick, impregnable gates, where death is king and the dead are held captive. Once someone has entered these gates, no human or earthly power can rescue him. The church of Christ, however, will not be *overcome* by this power of death. Jesus spoke here as one who was stronger than death and who would cause His church to share in His victory over it. He holds the keys of death and *Hades* (Revelation 1:18). In gathering His church, He would rob death of its prey (see John 11:25).”⁹
- V. **THE CONFSSIONAL NATURE OF CHRIST’S CHURCH.** The Greek word *homologia*, which means to say the same – to agree – indicates one’s direct tie to Christ, but also to the community that forms Christ’s Church. J. A. Heyns, in his exceptional treatment, writes, “The *homologia* were a declaration of faith that would seem to have assumed one or other fixed form in various circumstances and places was spoken aloud – in public gatherings (Phil. 2:11), on special occasions (1 Tim. 6:12), in preaching (Rom. 10:8-10), in encounters with the Jews (John 9:22; 12:42), with pagans (1 Tim. 6:13), and with heretics (1 John 4:2-3). As examples of the various *homologia* we might cite the following: *Jesus is the Messiah* (John 7:26, 41; 9:22; Mark 8:29); *Jesus is the Son of God* (John 1:34, 50), or these two in combination – *Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God* (John 11:27; 20:31); *Jesus is Lord* (Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11; 1 Cor. 12:3); *Jesus, the Son of David* (Matt. 12:23). We have already had occasion to refer to Peter’s confession. What is remarkable is that the three gospels in which it is recorded differ as to the words he used. In Mark 8:29 he says, *You are the Messiah*; in Matt. 16:16, *You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*, and in Luk. 9:20, *God’s Messiah*. If we accept the shorter form in Mark as the original, the other (later) forms could be regarded as expansions of it. But this need cause us no disquiet; quite apart from the fact that it coheres with the whole synoptic design, Peter’s confession says exactly that same thing in all three versions. This leads us to the important conclusion that *variations in confessional formulation do not necessarily imply different confessions*. Peter’s response was preceded by Jesus’ question, *Who do you say I am?* We may view this question about Christ and the resulting confession as the historical, objective origin of the Christian Church’s confession. When Peter replies (he has not thought it out for himself or learned it from other people, but the Father has revealed it to him), he speaks, not just for himself, but on behalf of the disciples – in fact his confession is on behalf of the Church of Christ. And if in the centuries to follow the Church saw fit to expand his confession, this was no more than obedience to the injunction of the same apostle: *Be always ready with your defense whenever you are called to account for the hope that is in you* (1 Pet. 3:15). Confessional formulation and expansion may also be regarded as the safekeeping of the deposit Paul urged on Timothy (1 Tim. 6:20). And it was precisely because they felt this word addressed directly to them that the Reformers proceeded to reformulate the confession, seeing that through its many centuries the Church had ceased to guard the precious deposit of the Messianic confession. This is why, in addition to the various ecumenical confessions, there are also such various Protestant confessions as *The Westminster Confession*, *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, *The Augsburg Confession*, *the Schmalkald*

Articles, The Heidelberg Catechism, the Confessio Belgica, and The Canons of Dort. But the confession has more than a historical motivation at one point in history; it gains another dimension through the words of Jesus: *Whoever then will acknowledge me before men, I will acknowledge him before my Father in heaven* (Matt. 10:32). And so the confession is not just a once-for-all event, but a continuing event; it must be repeated, and that it must be repeated publicly. It must also be completely intelligible, for in the confession we are concerned first and foremost, not with a statement that reflects the inner feelings or the intention of those who make it, nor yet with an oath of allegiance or an avowal of dependence, but with an objective state of affairs, in terms of which people can believe and profess their faith.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION: The history of the church has always been glorious. In fact, on the surface, church history abounds with examples of corruption, schisms and decay. The church has stumbled badly at times. She has been oppressed and her testimony has on many occasions suffered. None of this negates the promise Christ declared in Matthew 16:18. The true church down through the ages has continued. Despite the stumbling and falling, she has endured, because she is built upon the Rock of Christ. What is said of the church is true of every single believer. Christ has redeemed you and He will never lose you or let you slip away. He has so promises (John 6:39). Finally, Blair Smith points out that Peter’s confession is a personal confession of Peter’s, yes, but it also accurately states *who* Jesus is: He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Peter confesses that Jesus is the hoped-for Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. What is more, Peter confesses *what* Jesus is: divine. His confession sharply distinguishes Christ from the lifeless pagan deities that surround them. It also indicates Christ’s equality with God (see John 5:18). Peter’s brief confession has theological substance.

But to know why we as Christians continue to confess, we must look to Jesus’s *questions*. It’s a question of discipleship that reverberates down to all his followers throughout history: Who do *we* say that he is? This is a question of faith. Confessionalism begins with a simple question: *What do we believe?* The creeds, confessions, and catechisms developed by the church through the centuries can be seen as answers to Jesus’s question in Matthew 16. The study of confessional standards is more than a study of the church’s teaching. Since the purpose of creeds, confessions, and catechisms is to answer Jesus’s question in Matthew 16, these documents have a place in the life of every believer as a matter of discipleship. When Jesus asks, *Who do you say that I am?* he’s asking his *disciples*. If they, and we with them, are to follow him, we need to be able to say who he is. I think confessionalism would be much more valued in today’s church if it were reestablished as a question of discipleship. In our confessional standards, we are confessing *Christ*. And in doing so, we answer Christ’s fundamental question.”¹

ENDNOTES

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (rpt. Touchstone, 1996), p. 22.

² Harold Camping declares the church is over – no need for pastors, elders, deacons, or the Lord’s Supper, and baptism. This is a very serious error and one that will harm people who follow Camping. Equally as dangerous is the aberrant views of Barna and Viola. But perhaps more insidious are the advocates of the seeker-sensitive, user-friendly marketing mentality that drives the mega-churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback. John MacArthur is right when he states, “Nothing in Scripture indicates the church should lure people to Christ by presenting Christianity as an attractive option . . . The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (I Corinthians 1:18). There is no way to make it otherwise and be faithful to the message. . . . The gospel itself is disagreeable, unattractive, repulsive, and alarming to the world. It exposes sin, condemns pride, convicts the unbelieving heart, and shows human righteousness -- even the best, most appealing aspects of human nature—to be worthless, defiled filthy rags (cf. Isaiah 64:6).” Spurgeon warned his day, “when the old faith is gone, and enthusiasm for the gospel is extinct, it is no wonder that people seek something else in the way of delight. Lacking bread, they feed on ashes; rejecting the way of the Lord, they run greedily in the path of folly.” Peter Jennings, to my knowledge, is not a believer, but in the video *In the Name of God* he asks a thought provoking question: “As these churches try to attract sell-out crowds

are they in danger of selling out the gospel?" It is a worthy question. Well's assessment is close to the truth, "The church is losing its voice. It should be speaking powerfully to the brokenness of life in this postmodern world and applying the balm of truth to wounds that are fresh and open, but it is not. It is adrift." As cited in Gary Gilley, *This Little Church Went to Market: Is The Modern Church Reaching Out or Selling Out* (Evangelical Press, 2005), p. 75. One reason for the kind of books like Barna's is traceable to the whole concept of marketing the Church like a franchise. Barna was actually the leading figure back in the 80's in getting churches to do this very thing. Everything was structured around a sociological (and not a theological) understanding of the church as community – primarily as an audience with entertainment serving as the drawing card. Interestingly enough, about the time Barna was promoting this kind of thing, noted sociologist Robert Bellah wrote his influential book *Habits of Heart* that descried this development, this form of individualism as "Sheilaism." Bellah used the term in reference to one of the individuals in his book, "Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and who describes her faith as "Sheilaism." *I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.* Sheila's faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many. In defining *my own Sheilaism*, she says: *It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think he (God) would want us to take care of each other.*" As cited by David Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ In a Postmodern World* (Eerdmans, 2005), p. 150. Bellah concluded that the vast majority of Americans operated with the notion that the individuals should form their own belief system independent of the input of Religious institutions. Organized religion was viewed as a hindrance to religious privatism. Back then the churches that Barna was influencing were preoccupied with attracting and serving the individual. The focus has shifted and Barna now, ever in lockstep with the prevailing winds, is changing to keep pace. I will say this – the kind of "seeker sensitive," "user-friendly" churches that Barna influenced back then can rightly be said to have caused the very problem that now exists. After all, who really needs *that* kind of "church" when all that they offered, i.e., entertainment and therapeutic coddling, can be had elsewhere? These kinds of "churches" are totally expendable. Sadly, however, what Barna and others like him are offering likewise falls drastically short of what the Bible teaches about the importance of the communion of the saints that is centered in the New Testament understanding of the local church.

³ Barna and Viola are guilty of committing every kind of historical fallacy imaginable! See the review by Peter Jones, <http://www.Reformation21.org/shelf-life/pagan-christianity-exploring-roots-of-our-church-pr...>

⁴ K. DeYoung and T. Kluck, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion* (Moody, 2009), p. 7.

⁵ P. Berger, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (Vintage, 1974), p. 184f.

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Warnings to the Churches* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 12. Ryle is here referring to the famous statement of the church father Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (ca. 200-258) *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no possibility of being saved). It is interesting to note that the Reformers, especially John Calvin, affirmed this. Like Cyprian (and Augustine) the Reformer uses the image of the church as the mother. "Because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title "mother" how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. 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 . . . away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation . . . it is always disastrous to leave the Church." (*Institutes* IV, i. 4).

⁷ It is well-known that the Greek word (*petra*) translated "rock" here is different from the proper name Peter. The slight difference between them has no special importance, however. The most likely explanation for the change from *petros* ("Peter") to *petra* is that *petra* was the norm word for "rock." Because the feminine ending of this noun made it unsuitable as a man's name, however, Simon was not called *petra* but *petros*. The word *petros* was not an exact synonym of *petra*; it literally meant "stone." Jesus therefore had to switch to the word *petra* when He turned from Peter's name to what it meant for the church. There is no good reason to think that Jesus switched from *petros* to *petra* to show that He was not speaking of the man Peter but of his confession as the foundation of the church. The words "on this rock [*petra*]" indeed refer to Peter. Because of the revelation that he had received and the confession that it motivated in him, Peter was appointed by Jesus to lay the foundation of the future church. Peter preaches the first sermon the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40; note especially Peter's emphasis on Jesus as both Lord and Christ in verse 36). It is Peter who also is God's instrument in bringing in the Gentiles (Acts 10:1-11:18), cf. H. N. Ridderbos, *The Bible Student's Commentary: Matthew* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 303.

⁸ "That the powers of death will not prevail (Matt. 16:18) does not lie in Peter's power or in that of the other apostles. Rather, their lack of power is pictured all the way through Gethsamene." G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: The Church* (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 267.

⁹ Ridderbos, p. 304.5

¹⁰ J. A. Heyns, *The Church* (NGKB, 1980), pp. 148-149.

¹¹ D. Blair Smith, *Reformed Confessionalism* (P&R, 2025), p. 34.