

Chapter Two

“De Facto to You, Too!”

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST: ITS IDENTITY”

The first chapter was very simple and straightforward, presenting the mystery of the Church to you for your consideration. As something previously concealed from us but always a concept in the mind of God to be revealed at the appropriate time, the mystery of the Church of Jesus Christ is revealed only in the New Testament portion of God’s Word. As well, since the Church is declared to be a mystery, it also happens to be a spiritual matter in that the decisions reached by Church congregations reverberate in heaven, and the primary reason for the creation of the Church (which is to glorify God in Christ) is a never-ending and eternal purpose.¹

These things being true, for one reason or another, this matter of the Church will be understood differently by different people, in part because of the Holy Spirit’s illumination of believers, so our grasp of spiritual things is different in different Christians’ lives. This variation in the Spirit’s illumination is not to suggest there is variable truth or anything remotely like the notion of “your” truth or “my” truth. It is to observe that the light of illumination is a rather dim light this side of heaven, with each Christian knowing more about some things and less about other things than other believers. Such is the case with Scriptural truths related to the Church of Jesus Christ. Two godly members in the same congregation and under the same instruction from God’s Word will always understand spiritual truths somewhat differently. Differences in understanding hold with the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ as much as it does with any other doctrinal truth.

This second chapter is even simpler than the first, focusing on the identity of the Church of Jesus Christ. By identity, I mean whose it is and who owns it, who created it, and therefore by right of creation possesses it and ought to control it. You will please forgive these

¹ Ephesians 3.21

initial chapters being so very basic and simple. The initial chapters are so basic because there is so much confusion in the world about the Church of Jesus Christ that baby steps are very much needed to establish a solid foundation for future instruction.

What are some reasons for this confusion? The Roman Catholic Church has its long-held view that *it* is the Church of Jesus Christ, the universal visible church of Jesus Christ. The various Orthodox churches such as Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, Romanian, and Armenian have their view of the Church of Jesus Christ. The Anglicans (known in the USA as Episcopalians) have their view of the Church of Jesus Christ. Even the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Christ denomination, and Seventh Day Adventists add their confusing positions to the Mulligan stew of what the identity of the Church of Jesus Christ is thought to be by people. Then there are the significant numbers of Baptists that hold the essentially Protestant position concerning the Church.

If the identity of the Church of Jesus Christ reveals to us whose it is and who owns it, who created it and who therefore by right of creation possesses it and ought to control it, then we are faced with two considerations of the type that lawyers frequently talk about, *de facto* and *de jure*. Don't let these two Latin phrases discourage you; they are simple concepts. *De facto* is Latin for "from the fact."² *De jure* is Latin for "sanctioned by the law."³

These two Latin phrases will be the framework under which we will consider "The Church of Jesus Christ: Its Identity":

First, THERE IS THE DE FACTO OWNERSHIP OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

The Latin phrase "*de facto*," literally "from the fact," refers to reality.⁴ It is one thing, for example, for a contract to specify who under the law is authorized to make a business's decisions, but it is quite another thing to observe who is, in reality, making the decisions,

² Eugene Ehrlich, *Amo, Amas, Amat And More*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), page 97.

³ *Ibid.*, page 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*, page 97.

and who is controlling the operation. Ideally, of course, “de facto” is the same as “de jure.” However, that is sadly not the case in so many different situations.

Allow me to illustrate: We know from God’s Word that the husband is supposed to be the head of his household. It is a commonplace for us to recognize and admit that despite what is written in the Bible, and despite what oaths and promises are made when two people marry, it is most common in our culture for the wife to be the “de facto” head of the house and leader of the marriage. When the mother exercises final say concerning the disposition of her children, be it their diet, be it their attire, be it their education, or be it their discipline, then the mother is the “de facto” head of the house and leader in the home, not her husband. That sad reality ruins not only many marriages but also confuses many children.

Therefore, let us set aside for now a consideration of what different Christian denominations and groups of so-called Christians, and even congregations, claim about who owns the Church of Jesus Christ, who owns their Church, so that we might actually investigate who is the “de facto” owner of the Church by a consideration of their function. Observe and then conclude who actually, and for all practical purposes, owns and runs what they insist is the Church of Jesus Christ.

Without referring to any specific passage in the New Testament at this time, I would like to pose a question for your consideration: Does the Church of Jesus Christ engage in any legislative activity or is the Church of Jesus Christ an entity that is purely executive in its function? That is, does the Church of Jesus Christ decide what is right and wrong? Does the Church of Jesus Christ, for example, decide who is and who is not a saint? Does the Church of Jesus Christ possess authority to depart from the clear instruction of the Bible? Or is the Church of Jesus Christ supposed to restrict its activities to executive actions, being limited to doing what God’s Word directs it to do? Our task then is to discover and then to do His will as it is revealed in the Bible.

I am persuaded, and I hope you are persuaded as well, that God, the Word of God, and the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit to discover God’s will in the Bible, makes the Church of Jesus Christ a creation of the Lord Jesus Christ that is supposed to be

limited to executive actions, without any authority being granted to legislate in spiritual matters. If a congregation, or a denomination, or some religious body claiming to be the Church of Jesus Christ, engages in spiritual legislation, actually decides what is right and wrong, what is and is not sinful, such as who should be allowed to marry whom, then that so-called Church of Jesus Christ is the “de facto” owner of the Church instead of Jesus Christ Himself.

Then, THERE IS THE DE JURE OWNERSHIP OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

To refresh your memory, “de jure” literally means “sanctioned by law.”⁵ Thus, regardless of who decides how the money is to be spent, how the children are to be corrected and trained, and where the family will go on vacation year after year, the husband is, in fact, and according to the Word of God the actual head of the household. So declares God in His Word.

What we are interested in, therefore, is not who acts like they are the head of the Church of Jesus Christ by redefining what is and what is not sinful, by choosing what commandments to ignore and to obey, and by selecting what portions of God’s Word they will explain away. Such conduct is legislative and should have no part in Church life.

I maintain that the Bible clearly shows that Churches are strictly limited in God’s Word to executive actions, to doing what our Lord and Savior directed Churches to do as He gives them the grace to do it. Only then are congregations acting like what the Bible declares to be true, with Jesus Christ owning and governing His Churches because He created the first Church from which all subsequent congregations have sprung, He sustains them, and He makes them grow.

That said, what can we find in God’s Word that provides information for us regarding the Church of Jesus Christ’s relationship to Him? We begin with Matthew 16.18, where our Lord makes a statement that shows both ownership and intentions concerning His Church that has ongoing implications for His Churches:

⁵ Ibid., page 98.

“And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

After that passage demonstrating His ownership and intentions, notice next Matthew 18.15-20, showing His instructions to His Church:

- ¹⁵ Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.
- ¹⁶ But if he will not hear *thee*, *then* take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.
- ¹⁷ And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.
- ¹⁸ Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
- ¹⁹ Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven.
- ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Consider Matthew 28.18-20, where we are shown the Lord Jesus Christ’s authorization, commonly referred to as the Great Commission, revealing His authority over His Church at that time and His ongoing authority over His Churches today:

- ¹⁸ And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.
- ¹⁹ Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:
- ²⁰ Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, *even* unto the end of the world. Amen.

We next turn to Acts 2.47, where, on the Day of Pentecost, we see the Lord adding to His Church:

“Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

We now turn to the epistles, where the Apostle Paul declares Christ to be the head of the Churches:

Ephesians 1.22: “And hath put all *things* under his feet, and gave him *to be* the head over all *things* to the church.”

Ephesians 5.23: “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.”

Colossians 1.18: “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all *things* he might have the preeminence.

The Apostle Paul was inspired to present the Lord Jesus Christ as the head over everything for His Churches. He showed the Lord Jesus to be the Savior of the Churches. He also declared that Jesus Christ should have preeminence over His Churches in every way. Our final resort is Revelation chapters two and three, where we find seven letters written to the angels of the Churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Read each of those letters, and one thing stands out above all else; the Lord Jesus Christ in those letters exercises sovereign rule over the men placed by Him in positions of spiritual leadership. In other words, He is in charge in His Churches.

Who does the Word of God show to be in charge of the Church of Jesus Christ? He was its Creator. He is its Lord. He is the Head. He provides directions to the Churches for dealing with sin in their midst. He possesses all authority in heaven and on earth and therefore gives Churches marching orders in the form of the Great Commission so congregations will know how to serve Him. And He holds Church spiritual leaders accountable because He holds those Church’s pastors in His hand, Revelation 1.16, 20.

What I have described to you from God’s Word shows us the “de jure” head of the Churches, the One who on paper is supposed to

be in charge. How then does it come to be that the “de jure” head of the Churches is the “de facto” head of the Church? That is, how is the legal head of the Church shown to be the practical and the actual head of the Churches? Only when Churches function as executive bodies, as it is shown to be in the Bible, actually doing what the Lord Jesus Christ in His Word directs Churches to do.

Christians sometimes sing the tune, “He is Lord. He is Lord! He is risen from the dead for He is Lord!”⁶ Those are wonderful words to say, though merely singing those words announces that Jesus Christ is the “de jure” head over His Churches. What reveals Him to be the “de facto” head of His Churches is when each of His Churches is following His direction, obeying His Word, yielding to His Spirit, and engaging in the fulfillment of His Great Commission. The Church in Ephesus recognized the Lord Jesus Christ as the “de jure” head of the Church, by our Lord’s testimony, in Revelation 2.2-3, without of course using the Latin phrase:

- ² I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars:
- ³ And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.

However, what was the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ not being the “de facto” head of that Church, according to the Savior, in Revelation 2.4?

“Nevertheless I have *somewhat* against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”

We know from Second John 6 that love is obedience. Therefore, any congregation that does not comply with the Savior’s wishes has left their first love and thereby Christ has become the “de jure” head of the Church. Thus, what damage, what sin, what an outrage it is when we do not love our Lord enough to obey Him.

The Church of Jesus Christ is His institution, and we ought to conduct ourselves in the congregations as though we truly are His

⁶ “*He Is Lord*” by Frank Garlock.

Churches. His marks of ownership should be all over us, in our countenances, in our praises, in our devotional lives, in our evangelism, with everything we do reflecting that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. That properly displays our identity as the Lord Jesus Christ's Church.