

Chapter One

“I Disagree!”

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST: ITS MYSTERY”

The Roman Catholic Church has settled on the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ as being at the same time the Roman Catholic Church and no other, the universal Church (a claim made by their use of the word Catholic, meaning universal), and a visible church.¹ Protestantism, as represented by the Westminster Confession of faith, is also settled on the nature of the Church. Chapter XXV of the Westminster Confession of Faith describes the Church of Jesus Christ as being both visible and invisible. In like manner are the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1690 (SLBC chapter 26) and the Philadelphia Baptist Confession of Faith of 1742 (PBC chapter 27) settled on the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ being both invisible and visible. Modern and contemporary Baptists are also in agreement with this view of the Church.²

I disagree! More importantly, I dispute that God’s Word presents the Church of Jesus Christ as the Roman Catholic Church, like Protestantism, as the two Baptist confessions, and as two Baptist systematic theologies describe it. I will present a total of twenty-eight chapters and three appendices bearing in some way on the subject of the Church of Jesus Christ, of which this is the first, as a means of clearly establishing in the reader’s mind (and hopefully your heart, as well) what the Bible declares the Church of Jesus Christ to be.

This first chapter about the Church of Jesus Christ is very simple and intentionally straightforward.

¹ Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: The Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), pages 21-22.

² J. L. Dagg, *Manual Of Theology And Church Order*, Second Part, (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Gano Books, reprinted 1982), pages 100-139 and Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology Of Biblical Christianity, Volume 3*, (Allen Park, Michigan: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), pages 199-218.

I develop five main points for your consideration:

First, THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH IS NOT A CARDINAL DOCTRINE

Please do not react negatively to this first point. I recognize that the doctrine of the Church is a greatly beloved topic to some (and to me), though I understand a cardinal doctrine to be a doctrine that Christians certainly believe and that only non-Christians would reject as being true. However, as you might imagine, there are differences among various groups of Christians (and even within various groups of Baptists) regarding what constitutes a complete list of cardinal doctrines.

One source identified the cardinal doctrines held to be essential by most Protestant groups as follows:

The Trinity,
The deity of Jesus Christ,
The sinless life of Jesus Christ,
Jesus Christ's bodily resurrection,
Jesus Christ's ascension towards Heaven,
The atonement as a result of the life, and particularly the death,
of Christ,
Personal salvation by grace,
The inerrancy of the Bible,
The inspiration of the Bible's authors by the Holy Spirit,
God's inspiration of the Bible's authors,
The virgin birth, and
The anticipated second coming of Christ.³

The Bible Conference of Conservative Christians at Niagara, initially known as the Believers' Meeting for Bible Study, was organized in 1868 and met annually from 1883 to 1897 at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada. In 1878 they created the "Niagara Creed" -- a list of fourteen fundamental points of Christian belief. Among the fourteen points, the five principal beliefs were:

³ <http://www.religioustolerance.org/chrcarddoc0.htm> 1/30/15

The verbal and plenary inspiration of the Bible,
The total depravity of man, a Calvinist doctrine.
The necessity of being born again to achieve salvation,
Substitutionary atonement, and the
Premillennial return of Christ.⁴

In 1910 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) derived the following essential tenets from the Westminster Confession of Faith, the foundational document they share with other Reformed denominations:

The inerrancy of Scripture,
The virgin birth of Christ,
The substitutionary atonement,
Christ's bodily resurrection,
The miracles generated by Christ were authentic.⁵

Additionally, one could carefully scrutinize the First London Baptist Confession of Faith, the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, the Philadelphia Baptist Confession of Faith, and the New Hampshire Baptist Confession of Faith, where you would find clear statements made about the Church of Jesus Christ but no mention of core beliefs that distinguish Christians from non-Christians.

What is the point I seek to establish?

It is that I am unaware of any Christian group or any Christian theologian or commentator, be they Baptist or otherwise, who maintains that the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ is a cardinal doctrine of the Christian faith.⁶ What does that mean? It means that one does not have to believe or embrace what the Bible teaches about the Church of Jesus Christ to be a Christian. The doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ is not a central feature of the Gospel message and is not, therefore, a truth on which Christianity stands or falls. You can be a Christian who is right on the doctrine of the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Excepting, of course, the Roman Catholic Church and the various Orthodox Churches.

Church of Jesus Christ, and you can be a Christian who is completely wrong on the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ. Does what one believes about the Church of Jesus Christ make a difference? Yes, but not a difference related to the salvation of your eternal and undying soul.

Next, THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH IS AN IMPORTANT DOCTRINE

While the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ is not a cardinal doctrine, it is nevertheless a *very* important doctrine. It is not a doctrine that is related to whether or not one goes to heaven when he dies. It is a doctrine that is related to what the Christian's journey to heaven, as well as the Christian's entrance into heaven, will entail.⁷ How the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ relates to the believer's journey through the Christian life on his way to heaven is essentially the subject of this inquiry. Therefore, I will hold off on commenting about that at this time. What I would like to do now is establish for you that the Bible doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ is important to you because it is important to God.

Consider how many times the New Testament refers to the Church of Jesus Christ. I cite John Thornbury's *The Doctrine of the Church: A Baptist View*, a well-written book with good information, though I disagree with some of the conclusions he reaches:

There are only three Greek words appearing in the New Testament which are associated with the idea of a Christian assembly. These are *sunagoge*, *episunagoge*, and *ekklesia*. The first two appear in this connection only once. *Sunagoge*, which has a strong Jewish significance, is used fifty-seven times in the New Testament, James 2:2 being the only place with a Christian significance. As can be seen, it is translated assembly. *Episunagoge*, which means "A gathering together," is also used only once to describe a Christian convocation: Hebrews 10:25. *Ekklesia*, however, is used 115 times by the writers of the New Testament, 112 of which it is translated Church and three times assembly (in the King James

⁷ 2 Peter 1:11

Version). In all but four or five of these instances, it refers to the Christian Church. These exceptions, however, are extremely significant and are worthy of careful study. Some of them will be taken up later on in this chapter.

Ekklesia is derived from the Greek prefix *ek* (out) and *kaleo* (call). There were originally two essential ideas in the word as used in classical Greek, the first by etymology, the second by actual usage. The *ekklesia* was that which was “called out” and it was an “assembly.” Thus *ekklesia* originally meant “a called out assembly.” The Greek *ekklesia* was an assembly of citizens “called out” from their homes to public gathering places to discuss and transact public business. Liddell and Scott give this definition: “an assembly of the citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly.” The Greek city-states were essentially republican in their government, and it was the *ekklesia* which voiced the sentiments of the members of the community. “The will of the sovereign people was expressed in the *ekklesia*. Here were brought before them all matters, which, as the supreme power of the state, they had to order or dispose of. Indeed, there was no question which could not ultimately be dealt with by the assembled people, if they chose to exercise their plenary authority.” So much for the Greek *ekklesia*.⁸

If you take into account the three Greek words used by New Testament writers about the Church of Jesus Christ, the church is referred to by word usage no less than 114 times in the New Testament. Can we agree that something mentioned 114 times in the New Testament is important, even if it is not directly related to the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith?

As well as importance, consider the origin of the Church of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew 16.18, where the Savior said to His apostles,

“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.”⁹

⁸ John Thornbury, *The Doctrine Of The Church: A Baptist View*, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1972), pages 8-9.

⁹ All Bible verses are taken from the AV.

Never mind at this point the fine distinctions between the word translated “Peter” and the word translated “rock.”¹⁰ As well, set aside for later consideration the serious assertion by our Lord Jesus Christ that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against” His Church. What I would like to focus your attention on at present is the phrase “I will build my Church.” The Church of Jesus Christ is not just important because it is referred to directly by New Testament authors 114 times, but also because the Church of Jesus Christ is an entity brought into existence by the Savior Himself and said by Him to be His possession. He said, “I will build my Church.” Therefore, this truth is important even if it isn’t saving.

Third, THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH IS A SPIRITUAL DOCTRINE

There are two ways in which we can evaluate the spirituality of a thing, of an institution, of an organization, of truth, or an individual. Consider two beings, an angel and a human being. On their essence, an angel is spiritual because an angel does not in any way consist of matter. Angels are incorporeal, which is to say not physical. Human beings, on the other hand, have physical bodies that are comprised of matter: atoms and molecules of various types. Therefore, quite aside from how angels and humans behave, angels are in that sense spiritual in essence, while humans have physical bodies and are in that sense not spiritual. Another way to evaluate the spirituality of something, someone, or a concept is by its connection to or influence on that which is eternal, that which is of God, or even that which is antagonistic to God. The Church of Jesus Christ is spiritual in this sense, in that there is a relationship between the Church of Jesus Christ and both heavenly things and issues, as well as eternal things and issues. Allow me the opportunity to illustrate what I mean. In Matthew 18.15-20 the Lord Jesus instructed His disciples about matters of Church discipline and issues related to one in the Church sinning against another in the Church. Matthew 18.18 is key to our understanding of the spirituality of the Church:

¹⁰ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The International Critical Commentary*, “The Gospel According To Saint Matthew,” Vol II, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), pages 623-634.

“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.”

The unsaved and even many Christians pay little attention to the importance of the Church or its spirituality. However, the Lord Jesus Christ declared that the Church of Jesus Christ wields such spiritual authority on matters before it that the consequences of a Church’s decisions reverberate in heaven. That is what I mean by spiritual. Another example: In Ephesians 3.21 the Apostle Paul makes a statement to a Church about the Church of Jesus Christ:

“Unto him *be* glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”

Please ponder what the inspired apostle of Jesus Christ has stated to be true. If I may paraphrase, God will be glorified in the Church of Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ forever, through eternity, and in unending perpetuity. So be it. Once more we see evidence that the Church of Jesus Christ is something that is profoundly spiritual.

Fourth, THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH IS A MYSTERY DOCTRINE

Once again, I offer the fine comments of John Thornbury on this matter of mystery:

In several of his epistles, Paul used the word *mystery* to describe certain aspects of divine truth. A mystery in the biblical sense is understood to be something beyond the realm of human reason or something that only those to whom it is revealed can comprehend. Also, it sometimes refers to some important truth hidden in former times but now manifested or revealed. For example, the Gospel itself is called a mystery,¹¹ as is the incarna-

¹¹ Ephesians 6.19

tion of Christ,¹² and the resurrection.¹³ We also find references in the New Testament to “the mystery of iniquity,”¹⁴ “the mystery of faith,”¹⁵ and “the mystery of his will.”¹⁶ In the mind of Paul anything beyond the ken of the natural understanding — intelligible only by special divine instruction — was a mystery. Our concern at this time, however, is another mystery that is enlarged upon in two of Paul’s epistles. The central part of this mystery is the role the Gentiles have in the Christian dispensation. May the reader carefully consider the following passages.

- Eph 3.1 For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,
- 2 If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:
- 3 How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words,
- 4 Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)
- 5 Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;
- 6 That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:
- 7 Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.
- 8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

¹² I Timothy 3.16

¹³ I Corinthians 15.51

¹⁴ II Thessalonians 2.7

¹⁵ I Timothy 3.9

¹⁶ Ephesians 1.9

9 And to make all *men* see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:

Col 1:24 Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the Church:

25 Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God;

26 *Even* the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:

27 To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:

Only a casual perusal of these two sections of Scripture will reveal their great similarity. The same general truths are asserted in both passages. Here the word *mystery* appears five times, three of which are in Ephesians, the other two in Colossians. This mystery, according to Ephesians 3:5 and Colossians 1:26 had been hidden from former generations but has now been revealed or made manifest. Paul asserts in each passage that by the “dispensation of God” he sustained the office of a minister to proclaim the truth about this mystery (Eph. 3:2, 7; Col. 1:25). In both places, it is said that this mystery and the message about it had a peculiar reference to the Gentiles (Eph. 3:8; Col. 1:27).¹⁷

What is the big secret of past ages that was revealed primarily through the Apostle Paul? It was something that was before unimaginable; that Jews and Gentiles would come together as blood-washed and blood-bought believers in Jesus Christ in a single assembly to worship and serve the one true and living God, as he explains in Ephesians 2.11-22:

¹⁷ Thornbury, pages 34-35. Please note that I have included the verse divisions omitted by Thornbury.

- 11 Wherefore remember, that ye *being* in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;
- 12 That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world:
- 13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.
- 14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition *between us*;
- 15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, *even* the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, *so* making peace;
- 16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby:
- 17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.
- 18 For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.
- 19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;
- 20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner *stone*;
- 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:
- 22 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Paul writes about this mystery in his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, but Luke records the outworking of this mystery for us to catch a glimpse of in the Church in Antioch in Acts 13.1:

“Now there were in the Church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.”

The Church that was in Antioch was where Barnabas brought Paul to serve early in his Christian life. Perhaps it was there that Paul observed firsthand what he would write about years later, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians heretofore unimaginably worshipping and serving God in the same congregation. It was a mystery because it was *always* God's plan to bring such together, though it had been God's plan before Christ's coming for Jewish people to keep themselves separate.

Look at the leadership of that congregation, numbering five men: Barnabas, of course, was a Jewish believer. How about a man named Simeon whose nickname was Niger, meaning black? He was a black African and thus a Gentile believer. Lucius of Cyrene? Cyrene, located on the North coast of Africa, makes it likely that he, too, was a Gentile believer. Manaen, the man who was raised with Herod, the tetrarch? Perhaps an Idumean like Herod, or maybe a Roman. Then, of course, Saul, who was later known as Paul.

What is the mystery of the Church? That Jews and Gentiles were not only saved identically through faith in Jesus Christ and baptized by immersion thereafter, and that they could and did actually set aside so-called racial distinctions, cultural differences, and different religious backgrounds to display openly for one and all to see that they were one in Jesus Christ and comprised in the congregation His Church. I find it so sad that this great mystery, once hidden and now revealed, is so widely ignored by professing Christians in our day. However, there is an explanation for this mystery that is being ignored by so many.

Finally, THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH *REQUIRES* SPIRITUAL ILLUMINATION TO UNDERSTAND

In First Corinthians 2.13 the Apostle Paul wrote,

“Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”

There are some aspects of spiritual truth that no unsaved person has any hope of apprehending, because it is the truth that only the Holy Spirit teach-

es, and He will teach such things only to those He indwells, who are spiritually alive. However, other truths can be known to believers in Jesus Christ as they are taught by the Holy Spirit,¹⁸ but with the understanding that the Holy Spirit never teaches everything to every Christian, and never teaches Christians to the same degree of comprehension and understanding. Lewis Sperry Chafer writes,

“Illumination is specifically a work which is wrought by the Third Person, and, in so far as He opens the understanding to the Scriptures, He unveils that which He Himself has originated.”¹⁹

Thus, we must understand that some people do not grasp the mystery of the Church of Jesus Christ because they are lost and cannot be taught such truths in their lost condition. Others are believers harboring known sins that so grieve and quench the Spirit that He will not bless them with instruction about this mystery so long as they cling to their sin. And then there are spiritual Christians the Spirit has not chosen to illuminate to see what God’s Word teaches about the Church of Jesus Christ.

Illustrations of this truth can be better appreciated by referring to times when God greatly moved among men, pouring out abundant blessings, saving many, transforming lives, but without apparently illuminating the understanding of so many godly men for some reason concerning the mystery of the Church:

First, the Protestant Reformation. God did a big thing during the Reformation, which is an undeniable and world-changing reality. However, anti-Semitism was still strong among the Protestants in Europe, and their understanding of the Church was very dark.

Next, the First Great Awakening in England and the American colonies. George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards were men of towering spirituality, who despite their grasp of conversion and their passion for evangelism did not give evidence that they possessed either interest or much understanding about the nature of the Church. However, many of those saved in the First Great Awakening in the American colonies seemed to

¹⁸ John 16.13

¹⁹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. VI*, (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), page 37.

be more clearly illuminated, with new converts greatly adding to the ranks of Baptists.²⁰

Third, the primary figure in the Second Great Awakening was Asahel Nettleton, who was a lifelong Congregationalist, only a little more comprehending the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ than evangelical Anglicans.²¹

Fourth, there was the revival of 1859, in New York, and Belfast, and spilling over somewhat into London. Spurgeon's ministry was greatly used of God in connection with that revival, though beyond his understanding of his need for believer baptism by immersion and embracing certain Baptist positions seemed not to have clearly understood certain aspects of the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Finally, in the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905, the Korean Revival of 1907-1910, and the Isle of Lewis Revival of 1949-1952, the issue of the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ was never, to my awareness, an issue of great concern. However, this is quite understandable since revivals are about the great and profound matter of conversions.

If spiritual illumination is necessary for an understanding of the biblical doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ, then the divergence of opinions among good and godly men about the nature of the Church is understandable, just as the well-known differences George Whitefield and John Wesley had concerning the doctrines of grace are understandable.²² The Spirit of God simply does not completely illuminate anyone's understanding of the

²⁰ Of which Isaac Backus is but one example cited by Thomas Armitage, *The History Of The Baptists, Vol 2*, (Watertown, Wisconsin: Maranatha Baptist Bible College and Graduate School of Theology 1976 reprint), pages 720, 778-779.

²¹ Though Charles G. Finney claimed to be instrumental in the advance of the Second Great Awakening his own account of his conversion clearly places it a decade after its inception. See footnote 2 in Garth M. Rosell & Richard A. G. Dupuis, editors, *The Memoirs Of Charles G. Finney: The Complete And Restored Text*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, 1989), page 16 and Iain H. Murray, *Revival & Revivalism*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), page 118.

²² Dan Nelson, *A Burning and Shining Light: The Testimony and Witness of George Whitefield*, (Somis, CA: LifeSong Publishers, 2017), pages 93-104.

divine truth but imparts each believer's illumination of Bible truth in different measure.

In conclusion, recognize that the Church of Jesus Christ is profoundly important, but it is not of paramount importance. Who would deny that the deity of Jesus Christ, the Trinity of the Godhead, the inspiration of the Scriptures, and salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ are truths that are more important than one's ecclesiology? The Church of Jesus Christ is a topic worthy to be studied, learned, and applied. However, it is a matter about which good and godly men and women will differ, with some of those differences being insurmountable. We do well to grasp that the Church of Jesus Christ is a mystery, once hidden but now revealed as being for all who know Christ and have been Scripturally baptized, regardless of their so-called racial, cultural, ethnic backgrounds and differences.

It is a glorious thing to have Christ in common with another person. The Savior should be all you need to have enough in common to join with other believers to worship and to serve God in peace and harmony.