

The Church (1) The Universal Church

Introduction:

There are some aspects of the Christian faith that we might assume are understood by Christians who have been in the Lord for some time. But this would not be the case. Error and ignorance exist among Christians regarding many doctrines of the Christian faith. One of these areas of error and confusion is the nature of the church of Jesus Christ. There are many unbiblical views of the church that are held by Christians and perpetrated by those who claim to teach the Christian faith to others. Some of these unbiblical views were acquired through their personal church experience, assuming that what they had been a part of in the past was Scriptural in nature. They had never known anything different. They have never been in a setting in which they been taught rightly and clearly what the Holy Scriptures reveal about this important matter. Because error and confusion exist about this subject, many churches of Jesus Christ suffer. The result is that churches do not become what they should be or could be.

Some might believe a discussion of the doctrine of the church is not an important matter. They might think, "Detailed discussion about this is needless and fruitless." But the nature of the church of Jesus Christ has broad implications for faith and practice; that is, for what we believe and how we are to live as Christians within God's world. Great harm has come to God's people and to entire nations through history because of error about the nature and the identity of the church of Jesus Christ. And I would assert that in today's world of post-modernism and multiculturalism there is a greater need than ever to be precise about what we believe and why we believe what we do about the church of Jesus Christ. The world has influenced Christendom to blur the lines of distinction between Christian groups. Ecumenicism of the broadest kind is promoted. Most today believe that all distinctions between churches and denominations are artificial, unnecessary, and even sinful. They believe to keep separate from others who claim to be Christian is sinful and unspiritual. But in addition, there are those in the last generation who have attempted to "reinvent" the church in order to reach the people of our present day culture. New and strange models of church ministry are quite popular, advocating new, but unscriptural ways in which the church functions in our present world. But in addition, non-denominationalism is popular. It is commonly asserted, "Denominations do not matter." But what results is that the spirit of *non*-denominationalism in practice is *inter*denominationalism. All groups and churches that claim to be Christian are presumed to be part of the one "universal church", and so they are given legitimacy and are regarded with equality. Due to this spirit permeating Christendom, anything believed about God is presumed to be legitimate for the most part. Differences of belief or practice between groups are seen to be insignificant, and are to be overlooked as minor matters. This only underscores the importance to understand with precision what the Scriptures affirm to be true respecting these matters. And so, today I would like us to begin to examine what the Bible teaches about the church. I hope that as a result we will see more clearly what we are as a church of Jesus Christ and how our Lord would have us minister to the world about us.

First, let us acknowledge that when the Holy Scripture speaks about the church of Jesus Christ, it does so in two senses. One is the church that is commonly described as "*the universal church*." The other is "*the local church*." Sometimes these two forms of the church are described as the church *triumphant* (the universal church), and the church *militant* (the local church). Another common designation is the *invisible* church and the *visible* church. The invisible church would be comprised of all people in history who are truly born again and the visible church would be the local church congregation. Now, again, this may seem so elementary as to be needless and fruitless to spend time delineating the

subject, but please believe me, although most agree in these two expressions of the church of Jesus Christ, there is much difference of opinion and sharp disagreement as to the nature of these two entities. Today we will only have time to address the identity and nature of the universal church. And we will do so by examining two passages in the New Testament, Hebrews 12:22-24 and Matthew 16:13-20.

I. The universal Church (Heb. 12:22-24)

In Hebrews 12:22-24 we have the universal church described for us, specifically in verse 23:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels,²³ to the general assembly and *church of the firstborn* who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect,²⁴ to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. (Heb. 12:22-24)

Let me provide for us the context of our passage. The writer was in various ways exhorting the Jewish Christians to whom he was writing to persevere in their faith in Jesus Christ. Due to the threat upon them for being Christian, they were tempted to forsake Jesus Christ and return to worship and serve God according to the old covenant system that God had been given to Israel through Moses. The writer in numerous ways throughout this epistle showed them why that this course of action was not an option for them. If they forsook Jesus, they would not receive salvation. Salvation is in Jesus Christ alone.

The writer did not set forth an argument that many well-meaning evangelicals assume about God's dealings in history. He did not argue that though God had formerly dealings with the nation of Israel but now in this age His concern is with the church. No, rather the writer showed them that God throughout history has been leading all people of faith--His one people--on a journey, or pilgrimage, that will eventually bring them to the heavenly Jerusalem. In heaven, they all, we all, all believers from all periods of history, will come into the presence of God as one people of God, "the church of the firstborn"; only they will enjoy every blessing forever.

The writer had shown in the previous chapter (Heb. 11) that even the Old Testament Patriarchs of Israel were looking forward in faith not to dwell in an earthly city (Jerusalem) but rather they, just as New Testament believers, were journeying by faith to a city whose builder and maker is God. We read this in **Hebrews 11:8-10:**

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; ¹⁰for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

The earthly Canaan was only a shadow of the heavenly reality, which they saw in faith. Old Testament believers desired what New Testament believers are promised. The Old Testament saints never realized their desires in this world, but they lived in the light of God's promise. Why? Because God determined they would not receive their full inheritance until we, believers in this age, complete our journey as we follow them by faith to Mount Zion, the heavenly city of God. We read further,

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11:13-16)

And then farther down we read,

And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, ⁴⁰ God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. (Heb 11:39-40)

We, as they, are on this pilgrimage, this journey of faith, one people of God stretching in number since the beginning of time, travelling through this world, a barren wilderness, journeying to our heavenly promised land (cf. 11:16).

The writer urged these Jewish New Testament believers in Jesus Christ not to go back to their former Jewish ways, but rather to journey onward in faith to their heavenly reward that awaits them at the end of their lives of faith. The old covenant characterized that section of the road that believers in the past travelled, but new covenant believers are now passed that stretch of the road. And now that Jesus Christ has come and died and risen again, the end of the journey is in sight. They are coming to “Zion” the promised city of God. God, therefore, will have no pleasure in them if they “shrink back” (return to Judaism). Just as God rejected and judged the children of Israel who refused to enter and take possession of the Promised Land, so God would reject these if they refused to follow the lord Jesus onward to Zion. Just as those apostates had forsaken the lord and wanted to return to Egypt and thereby incurred God’s judgment, even after God had so graciously delivered them, these professing Christians must not commit the same sin of apostasy. They must continue onward in faith. It is as if the writer were saying,

“Besides, look how close you are to the end. It is time to sprint to the end, not go back. Why, see them; the first of us believers have arrived already. Consider their witness (cf. 12:1). But most importantly, for ongoing strength in your journey, consider Jesus who Himself endured hardship so as to secure an entrance for us. Focus on His sufferings and hardship lest you become weary and discouraged in the way that is leading to glory (12:3f). Yes, it is difficult, but not only is God bringing you on this road of difficulty to get you to heaven, He is using the difficulty of the road to prepare you for heaven. You are His sons, and you have forgotten that He is preparing you through chastening so that you will be prepared to receive your inheritance as sons when you finally arrive to the city of which you are a citizen (12:5-11). God has a purpose in making your way difficult, it is so ‘that we may be partakers of His holiness’ (11:10). Let us press on in faith, encouraging one another and helping one another lest sin prevent us from finishing this journey. We read in 12:12, ‘Therefore strengthen the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees’ (a description of weary travellers) and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.”

And now we come to Hebrews 12:18ff, which would have been very significant to Jewish believers. He tells them, “You are not approaching Mount Sinai, as great an event as that was, but rather, you are approaching heaven itself.” You are not coming to a physical mountain (“that may be touched”) in which the holiness of God was manifested when He gave the Law to Moses. Your privilege is much greater. You are coming to Mount Zion, heaven itself, the heavenly Jerusalem, the very dwelling place of the living God. And it is as though he is telling these people,

“You are right there. You are just about to arrive at your final destination. It is just in sight now. Do you see it through the eyes of faith? Just look who is there as we arrive! We are coming into the presence of the living God! And look, there is “an innumerable company of angels.” And whom else do you see? You will see the gathered church before Him.”

It is here where the universal church is described. We may see that...

A. The universal church is the “general assembly” (12:23a). This speaks of a “festal gathering”, probably a reference to the great banquet of the Messiah that is spoken about so much in Scripture.

Eating a meal together is one of the supreme expressions of fellowship in the Scriptures. And here the people of faith are, gathered before the Living God in this great festive atmosphere.

B. The universal church is the church (Greek: *Ecclesia*- called out gathering) of the first born who are registered in heaven.” Elsewhere Jesus Christ is described as the firstborn son (e.g. Col. 1:15, 18). We are His brothers and sisters through adoption (e.g. Eph. 1:5). Here, however, the metaphor is given that we, too, are first-born sons. My **New Reformation Study Bible** gives a good note about this expression of verse 23:

All the firstborn in Israel were sanctified at the time of the Passover and consecrated to service in God’s presence, but the Levites served the sanctuary in the place of the firstborn (Numbers 3:11-13). In the heavenly assembly all believers, redeemed from destruction, are “firstborn”, consecrated to God, and enrolled as His priests. (NGSB, p. 1955)

C. The universal church includes “the spirits of just (justified) men (and women) made perfect.” All who are justified through faith have been made “perfect” through the work of Christ and now stand before God. This includes all Old Testament saints, who the writer has in particular view (cf. Heb 11:40).

And then also, as we are approaching our Heavenly Zion, we see Jesus, “the Mediator of the new covenant.” The new covenant is the only covenant that makes sinners into saints and fit to come into the presence of the living God. And this covenant is based upon Jesus’ sacrificial death for His people by which He pardons them and cleanses them from sin so as to present them holy before God.

The point we want to stress is this, *there will be one church in eternity, the one people of God, comprised of Jew and Gentile believers of all ages, who all equally have been brought before God through the mediation of Jesus Christ, the One Savior of all His people.*

Here is a good definition of the universal church:

The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.¹

This definition is from *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*. We will give emphasis to two aspects of this definition. We will then show in what ways some Christians understand the church to be defined differently.

1. The universal church may be called the “invisible” church. The word invisible is used because the universal church is comprised of those who have experienced a spiritual work of salvation in their souls. This spiritual work of grace is not overtly evident. You cannot see outwardly whether or not a person is truly born again, although you can see evidence that the new birth has taken place.

2. The universal church is made up of all the chosen people of God throughout all of history; all who are redeemed from their sin by Jesus Christ comprise the universal church.

But there is a very popular different interpretation of the universal church. Many Christians believe the universal church is to be identified differently than the above definition and the description that we see in Hebrews. They would say that the universal church does not include Old Testament believers, but rather it comprises only true believers from the Day of Pentecost until the Second Coming

¹ *The Baptist Confession of Faith, 1689*, Art. 26, par. 1.

of Jesus Christ. It is popularly asserted that the universal church only contains true believers in Jesus Christ on this side of the death and resurrection of Christ.

This view distinguishes sharply between the nation of Israel and the church. Espousers of this view assert that Israel is Israel and the church is the church and the two should not be confused or intermingled with one another. It is believed that Israel and the church have different purposes in God's work of redemptive history. Some assert they have different destinies. Israel will dwell in eternity on the earth; the church will be with Christ in heaven.

Now we readily admit that there is a distinction between believers under the old covenant and believers under the new covenant. The true people of God in Old Testament times were believers who were for the most part a part of national Israel, many of which, from Moses onward, who were living under a national covenant. The vast majority of them were from one ethnic nation, Israel. But most of the people of God in this new covenant age are Gentile, which is in accordance with the declared purpose of God to take His gospel to the nations. And so, even though we would acknowledge and affirm that there are distinctions between the old and new order, an understanding of the universal church should include all true believers through history. Consider these passages:

1. John 10:26 -- Jesus taught, "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." Jesus indicated that His sheep are of "one fold", but his sheep are comprised of Jewish and Gentile believers.

2. Matthew 8:10, 11 -- Upon seeing the faith of a Gentile, Jesus said, "Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel, And I say unto you, that many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven." Here the Lord taught that Gentiles would be seated with the Patriarchs of Israel. Gentile believers also enjoy the promises that God had given to the Fathers.

3. Matthew 19:28 -- "And Jesus said unto them, 'Verily I say unto you, that you which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'" Notice here that the twelve Apostles are promised authority to lead the twelve tribes of Israel.

4. Romans 4:9-18 -- Abraham is the father of all Gentile believers. "Israel", the people of God, are spiritual descendants of Abraham, not his physical descendants.

5. Romans 9:6 -- "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel." There is a "national Israel" but there is a "spiritual Israel" also.

6. Galatians 3:6-8 -- "just as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. ⁷Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. ⁸And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, 'In you all the nations shall be blessed.'"

Let me say one more matter about the nature and identity of the universal church before we move on in our study. We should not assume that Christian institutions, such as parachurch organizations, denominations, or national (state) churches are part of the universal church. Organizations are not a part of the universal church, only true believers as individually chosen and redeemed by Christ are enrolled as citizens in heaven and will have a part in that complete gathering of the church at the end of the age. Do not legitimize churches and movements because of a faulty view of the universal church. May the Lord help us to be discerning in these matters. The universal church is in the process of being gathered as true believers complete their life of faith and they come into the presence of God. This universal church has not yet been fully gathered, for not all of the elect have arrived before the throne of God.

Let us look at another passage in which we read of the universal church.

II. The relationship between the universal church and the kingdom of God (Matt. 16:13-20)

We have spoken recently about the kingdom of God. Here is a question that would do us well to answer: *How does the universal church relate to the kingdom of God*, if it does at all? Let us turn and consider our Lord's words in **Matthew 16:13-20**. Let us read this passage:

¹³When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"

¹⁴So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

¹⁶Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My *church*, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹And I will give you the keys of *the kingdom of heaven*, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

²⁰Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.

Here we see that the church of Jesus Christ is related closely with the kingdom of heaven, i.e. the kingdom of God. Let us consider the implications and explanation of Jesus (16:17-19)

1. The foundation of the church (Matt. 16:18f)

We first read of our lord's words to Peter, "*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church...*" Our Lord renamed Simon, calling him "Peter" (which is a masculine noun). Our Lord then said that He would build His church upon this "rock." But the Greek word translated as "rock" in this second occurrence is not the masculine form, as in the name, Peter, but it is the feminine form of the Greek word; it is not *Petros* (Πέτρος), but *Petra* (πέτρα). The masculine form was used in ancient Greek language to describe a small rock or stone. The feminine form was used to depict a rocky ledge, or a large boulder.

This statement of our Lord to the apostle Peter is, of course, one of the most important verses of Scripture which **The Roman Catholic Church** has used to assert authority for their pope and for the exclusive claim of legitimacy for their church. Their interpretation of the passage may be gleaned from *The Catholic Catechism*, which reads as follows:

881. The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the 'rock' of his Church. He gave him the keys of his Church, and instituted him shepherd of the whole flock. 'The office of binding and loosing which was given to Peter was also assigned to the college of apostles united to its head.' This pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles belongs to the Church's very foundation and is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the Pope.

882. The *Pope*, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, 'is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of unity both of the bishops and the whole company of the faithful.' For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.'

883. ‘The *college* or *body of bishops* has no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter’s successor, as its head.’ As such, this college has ‘supreme and full authority over the universal Church; but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman Pontiff.’²

In these paragraphs of the Catholic Catechism, we read several assertions regarding the office of the pope and his authority, all ‘based’ on our Lord’s words to Peter recorded in Matthew 16:18 and 19. Before we attempt to discern the objective meaning of the passage, let us consider several assertions of the Catechism that are not taught in this passage, though the Catechism assumes and claims that they are.

(1) It claims “The Lord made Simon alone, whom he named Peter, the ‘rock’ of his Church.” That is one interpretation of verse 18, but it may not be, and I would say is not, the correct one. “Peter” is a masculine Greek noun; the “rock” on which the church is built is a feminine noun. They are different words.

(2) It claims that the Lord gave Peter the “keys to the kingdom”, which is true, but it makes assertions regarding “the keys” and his “successors” that is not taught in the passage. The Lord did not institute Peter as “the shepherd of the whole flock.” The church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, not upon Peter alone. Of the church, Paul wrote,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²²In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

(3) The claim that “this pastoral office of Peter and the other apostles... is continued by the bishops under the primacy of the pope” is not taught by our Lord. The bishop of Rome did not begin to claim or assert formally his authority as pope over all of Christendom until the year AD 1054, at which time the pope asserted his authority over the Eastern Orthodox Church, which rejected his claim. It came to be known as “The Great Schism”, separating the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic branches of Christendom fully.

(4) There is no place in Matthew 16:18 and 19 that the Lord Jesus commanded that there would be a formal succession of bishops who would have the same authority as Peter and the Twelve Apostles. The assertion, ‘The *college* or *body of bishops* has no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter’s successor, as its head’, cannot be legitimized by what is taught in Matthew 16:18f.

(5) The Lord does not say that Peter or “the popes” that supposedly followed him were “the perpetual and visible source and foundation of unity both of the bishops and the whole company of the faithful.”

(6) The Lord does not declare Peter to occupy an “office as Vicar of Christ”, which means, that he is supreme head, or the representative or substitute of Christ on earth.³ Yet this has been the claim of popes in history.

In 1890, Pope Leo XIII said of himself, “The supreme teacher in the Church is the Roman Pontiff. Union of minds, therefore requires, together with a perfect accord in one faith, complete submission and obedience of will to the Church and to the Roman Pontiff, *as to God himself*.” In 1894, he said: We hold the place of Almighty God on earth.”

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), p. 205.

³ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15403b.htm>

On April 30, 1922, in the Vatican throne room before a throng of cardinals, bishops, priests, and nuns, who fell on their knees before him, Pope Pius XI in haughty tones said, “You know that I am the Holy Father, the representative of God on earth, the Vicar of Christ, which means that ***I am God on the earth.***”⁴

These are the kind of claims made by Rome and the opinion that is to be held by all the faithful, according to Rome, based on what is taught here in Matthew 16:18 and 19. The passage teaches no such doctrines.

If what we have said reflects what Matthew 16:18 and 19 does *not say* and does *not teach*, what does the passage teach us respecting “the rock” on which Christ would build His church?

There are three (perhaps four) major interpretations of our Lord’s words, “on this rock I will build My church.”

(1) The ***Petra*** (πέτρα) on which Jesus builds His church is ***the profession of faith*** that Peter expressed. One may argue, therefore, that our Lord was not saying that He would build His church upon Peter, but using the name of Peter as a play on words. What, then, was our Lord referring to? There are a number of proposed meanings, but I take the position that our Lord was declaring that He would build His church upon the “rock” of this profession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Recognition, dependence upon, and confession of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the Living God”, and purposing to live with the reality of this truth as the foundation of one’s life, is the basis on which the New Testament church is built.

(2) Some argue that Christ Himself is the Rock on which the church is built. But in this context, our Lord depicts Himself as the builder of the church, not the foundation on which the church is built.

(3) The ***Petra*** (πέτρα) on which Jesus builds His church is indeed ***Peter***, as the leading spokesman of the Apostles. This is not to say that the Lord was declaring Him to be the first of a line of popes, but that he was a foundation on which the Lord would build His church. (cf. Eph. 2:19-21)

I prefer to see Jesus’ reference to the rock on which He would build His church to be ***the profession that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God***. If our Lord meant to identify Peter as the rock, why did He use a different word for rock, the feminine form rather than the masculine form for the name of Peter? If the Lord was conferring authority to Peter as “the rock” on which the church would be built, why did He not say so directly? Why did not He say, “Peter, on ***you*** I will build my church?” The reason is that He did not intend to identify Peter as the rock on which He would build His church, but upon the profession of faith that Peter expressed that answers the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” On this rock, Christ is building His church.

2. The identity of “the church” in this passage.

In this most important verse (16:18) the first mention of the word “church” is found in the New Testament. Jesus said, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My ***church***.” The Greek word for church is ***ekklesia*** (ἐκκλησίαν). It is a compound word, combining a form of ***καλεω***, meaning “to call”, preceded by the preposition ***ἐκ***, meaning “out of.” It refers to a “called out” assembly.

What is the meaning of the word “church” in the Bible? It is commonly taught that the Lord’s church is in two different forms. ***First***, there is ***the local church***, a called out assembly of disciples, committed believers in Jesus Christ. ***Second***, there is ***the universal church***, which is sometimes

⁴ Ralph Woodrow, ***Great Prophecies of the Bible*** (Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1971), p. 145.

(unfortunately) called, “the true church”, or worse, “the invisible church.” Most Reformed Christians would understand the universal church as we described earlier, to be comprised of all the redeemed of all ages, both Old Testament and New Testament believers. Most evangelicals, however, believe the universal church to be only New Testament believers, those who have believed on Jesus Christ. Believers in the Old Testament, they would argue, are part of “Israel”, not the “church.”

Israel was a true “church” but not in any sense the N. T. church—the only point of similarity being that both were “called out” by the same God. All else is contrast.⁵

Here is another assertion in a footnote of the Scofield Bible:

Church (true), Summary: the true church, composed of the whole number of regenerate persons from Pentecost to the first resurrection (1 Cor. 15:52), united together to Christ by the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12, 13), is the body of Christ of which He is the Head (Eph. 1:22, 23). As such, it is a holy temple for the habitation of God through the Spirit (Eph. 2:21, 22); is “one flesh” with Christ (Eph. 5:30, 31); and espoused to Him as a chaste virgin to one husband (2 Cor. 11:2-4).

I believe, as do most who are reformed in their biblical understanding, that the universal church is comprised of the total number of all the redeemed of all of history, the Israel of God. We certainly recognize the great advance and change that the church underwent through the coming of Christ, His death and resurrection, the pouring out of His Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and the inclusion of Gentiles into His body. Yes, we do recognize the distinction, but we also recognize the continuity of the old with the new.

To say that the saints of the Old Testament are not part of the “church” divides the people of God. Besides, if that were the case, it would result in some unsolvable theological problems. For example, if Israel and the church are to be seen only in distinction from one another, that they are two separate peoples and have two separate destinies in the purpose of God, we might ask these questions:

(1) At what point in biblical Israel did “Israel” begin as a separate constituted people? Was it with the call of Abraham? Was it when God changed Jacob’s name to “Israel”? Was it after God had constituted Israel at Mount Sinai after having formed the people into a nation having brought them out of Egypt?

(2) What of the believers who lived prior to the formation of Israel, whenever one chooses to identify the date of founding? What of Abraham? What of Noah and his family before him? What of Enoch, or even Adam and Eve, if they were redeemed? If one argues that there are two peoples in God’s program, Israel and the church, you must have at least a third, the believers before Israel. What are they to be called? What set of promises are theirs?”

No, it is best, it is easiest, and it is biblical to see all of the redeemed of all ages to be members of God’s universal church which shall be gathered together as one people before the throne of God and the glorified Lamb who secured their redemption. We have already seen in Hebrews 12 that this “church” is one gathering, of Old Testament saints and New Testament believers, which we join ourselves upon the completion of our journey of faith.

Let us look again at Matthew 16:18 and 19. Here we read that our Lord made reference to *the kingdom of heaven* in the same context as His mention of *the church*.

⁵ C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 1021.

¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **My church**, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of **the kingdom of heaven**, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

When our Lord commended the faith of the Gentile centurion, a New Testament believer, He spoke of the common table of fellowship, in other words, the mutual enjoyment of the kingdom of heaven, that both Gentile believers and Old Testament saints would enjoy together. Jesus said,

When Jesus heard this (i.e. the Gentile’s expression of faith), He marvelled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, **many will come from east and west** (i.e. Gentile believers) and **recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven**, ¹²while the sons of the kingdom (i.e. unbelieving Jews) will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 8:10-12)

There is one kingdom of heaven (God). There is one universal church, comprised of the redeemed of all ages.

But one might object, “Does not our Lord say in Matthew 16:18, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I **will build** My church”? This is a **future tense** verb. Does this not affirm the position of those who say the church began on the Day of Pentecost, which was yet future of this occasion when Jesus made this declaration?”

We would acknowledge that our Lord was speaking of what He was intending to do through His apostles: “I will build My church.” But this does not mean that the Old Testament believers should not be viewed as members of the “church” that our Lord was describing here. This “church” that Jesus was going to build was just as the kingdom that He was inaugurating. Old Testament believers would be in His kingdom, and Old Testament believers would be in His church.

The church of Christ, in its largest signification, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22, 23; 3:10; 5:24, 25; Col. 1:18; Heb. 12:23). In this sense, the church is identical with the spiritual kingdom of God; both signify that redeemed humanity in which God in Christ exercises actual spiritual dominion (John 3:3, 5).⁶

When Adam and Eve sinned, they had been lost to the kingdom of God, having been excluded from the paradise of God. The whole story of Scripture is that of their regaining a place and part in the kingdom that God was going to inaugurate one day on behalf of His people.

Man was excluded from the kingdom of God at his expulsion from Paradise: his restoration to that kingdom has been the grand end of all God’s subsequent dispensations (ages). This restoration, according to the divine plan, was to be accomplished through a mediatorial kingdom, of which the God-man Christ Jesus should be King. Under this kingdom of the Mediator the universe should no longer be governed immediately by God, but immediately through the God-man, all power in heaven and in earth being given unto Him.⁷

Just as the kingdom of God was promised in the Old Testament and came into realization with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, so the church too was promised in the Old Testament but came into realization with the coming of Jesus Christ. Just as Old Testament believers were brought to enjoy the kingdom blessings that came with Jesus Christ when He inaugurated the kingdom, so they, too, were brought to share in their participation in the universal church that our Lord has built.

⁶ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (The Judson Press, 1969), p. 887.

⁷ Hezekiah Harvey, *The Church: Its Polity and Ordinances* (Backus Book Publishers, orig. 1879, 1982), p. 21.

Our Lord promised certain and total victory of His church in the world. **Verse 18b, “and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”** No force or power of the devil, including death, would be able to prevent their efforts to further the Kingdom of God. The cause of God in Christ would most certainly advance through the church in the world. The Lord promised the church that it will prevail and conquer. And no foe would be capable of stopping the advance of its forces. The Lord Jesus was assuring His disciples that no force would be able to bring harm or bring defeat of His kingdom.

Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, Who only does wondrous things!
And blessed be His glorious name forever! And let the whole earth be filled with His glory.
Amen and Amen.
(Psa 72:18f)
