

The Church

by Sebastian R. Fama

Evangelicals and Fundamentalists claim the Church established by Jesus is not a visible institution. They say the Church is merely the body of all true believers wherever they may be. That is, in different denominations or in no denomination at all. This idea serves two purposes. First, it is an attempt to discredit the Catholic Church which is a large and visible organization. Second, it is an attempt to justify the rampant disunity in Protestantism.

While this view may be attractive to some, it is easy to see that such a view is inconsistent with Scripture. Jesus compares His Church only to visible things, such as a flock, a body, a house, a city set on a hill, and a kingdom. And of course, that makes perfect sense. If the Church were not a visible institution how would anyone know for certain what the truth was? Paul describes **the Church** as "**The pillar and foundation of truth**" (1 Timothy 3:15). The words "pillar and foundation" signify doctrinal assurance and stability, not division and confusion.

Under the Old Covenant we see a system that is visible, hierarchical, and authoritative. Thus, the people of God knew what was expected of them. The New Covenant is the fulfillment of, and superior to, the Old Covenant. Are we really to believe that the superior covenant would be lacking in these critical elements? God is the author of all truth and He chooses to communicate that truth through the Church He established. By design, believers are to be a part of that Church. That Church has many parts, and the many parts have different functions (1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

The function of the Church's hierarchy is clearly shown in Scripture. Peter and the council of Jerusalem taught by the power of the Holy Spirit: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things..." (Acts 15:28). All the Churches were to abide by the decision: "As they went on their way through the cities, they [Paul and Timothy] delivered to them for observance the decisions which had been reached by the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem." (Acts 16:4).

Bishops were in authority over congregations: "This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). The office of bishop is spoken of eight times in the New Testament. The Greek words used are episcopos (ἐπίσκοπος), which means a superintendent or overseer, someone who visits, and episkope (ἐπισκοπή), which just refers to the office.

Presbyters were reminded of their responsibilities: "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church... 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them'" (Acts 20:17, 28-30).

How do you suppose those "who speak perverse things" will appear? "And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So, it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness." (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Thus, John says, "We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." (1 John 4:6).

This reflects Jesus' own words: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me." (Luke 10:16), and: "If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." (Matthew 18:17). Nowhere does Jesus ever say: "Go read the Bible and judge for yourself." Consequently, believers were to submit to Church authority:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings... Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you (Hebrews 13:7-9, 17).

The word "leader" is translated from the Greek word hegeomai (ἡγεῖσθαι) and means to lead with official authority. Similarly, in 1 Peter 5:5 we read, "Likewise you that are younger be subject to the elders."

The teaching of the early Church parallels the scriptures. In the year 110, Ignatius of Antioch wrote in his *Letter to Polycarp*, "You must be made holy in all things by being united in perfect obedience, in submission to the bishop and the priests." That Rome was the source of authority is confirmed by Irenaeus (A.D.140-202): "We point to the tradition of that very great and very ancient and universally known Church, which was established at Rome...for with this Church, because of its superior authority, every church must agree" (*Against Heresies* 3, 3:2).

But there are those who claim that at some point the Church lost its way. And as you might expect these individuals see it as their duty to set things straight. But is that even possible? Isn't Jesus God? And isn't God all powerful? In Matthew 16:18 Jesus clearly said that the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church. Is God not able to bring about what He promises? Catholics think He is capable. Jesus expands on this idea in Matthew 28:18-20:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded** you; and lo, **I am with you always**, to the close of the age."

Here we see Jesus speaking with Divine authority. He tells his apostles to teach all nations. And He promises to be with them always. He specifically mentions "the close of the age." This of course goes well beyond the lifespan of the twelve apostles. When we combine that with Matthew 16:18 (the gates of hell shall not prevail) the picture is clear. Jesus commands that His Church teach with full authority until He returns at the end of the age. To say that the Church could lose its way doctrinally would contradict the very words of Jesus.

Jesus prayed that we would be one as he and the Father were one so that the world would know that He was sent by the Father (John 17:20-23). When we are not united as Jesus and the Father are united it hurts our public witness. And that keeps people away from the Church. Jesus said: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32). The fact that Jesus uttered these words means that the truth is something that can be known with certainty. If such were not the case, Jesus' statement would be a tease and not an invitation.

Even men with the best of intentions can get it wrong. The thousands of Protestant denominations are a great illustration of this very thing. Scripture says the truth is important. Disunity says, "but none of us knows exactly what it is." Paul warns us against forming divisions:

I appeal to you brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:10-13)

So, we are on solid ground when we say that there are to be no dissensions among believers. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that any system that allows for dissensions is opposed to the Word of God. As Paul said: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, **one Lord, one faith, one baptism**" (Ephesians 4:4-5). Elsewhere he says: "Complete my joy by **being of the same mind**, having the same love, **being in full accord and of one mind**" (Philippians 2:2).

Speaking to His apostles Jesus said: "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). If Jesus keeps His promises, and there is no reason to believe that He doesn't, what need would there ever be for divisions? Jesus saw to it that the Church He established possessed "all of the truth." And it would possess that truth, from the moment it was delivered until the end of its earthly existence. That some see it differently is not an act of God, but the product of our fallen nature.