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THE CHURCH

Despite some major differences between Catholics and evangelicals on the nature of the church (see chaps. 13 and 14), there are also some significant similarities. Even the great Reformer Martin Luther said, “the Roman Church is holy, because ‘it has God’s holy name, the gospel, baptism, etc.’ ”¹ And despite his strong criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church, John Calvin, writing to a cardinal of his time, added that this does not mean “that Roman Catholics are not also Christians. ‘We indeed, Sadoletto, do not deny that those over which you preside are Churches of Christ.’ ”²

Common doctrinal beliefs warrant including the topic of the church in this section on “agreements.” This common heritage includes, interestingly enough, Catholic beliefs about the foundation, nature, and function of the church. Therefore, “The Church is not primarily an object of theology, but its subject.”³ Among the areas of commonality are the origin and nature of the Christian church. Both Catholics and Protestants believe the church was built on Christ, the chief cornerstone (1 Cor. 3:11 ; Eph. 2:20). Both believe

1 Cited by Gustaf Aulén, *Reformation and Catholicity*, trans. Eric H. Wahlstrom (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), p. 76.

2 Cited by Alan Thomson, *New Movements, Reform, Rationalism: Revolution 1500–1800* (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 28–29. Moving closer to our time, Abraham Kuyper, the famous Dutch Reformed scholar, was clearly ecumenical in his view of the church and can serve as an example for evangelicals today. During his 1898 Princeton Lectures, he stated: “Calvin in his day already acknowledged that, as against a spirit from the Great Deep, he considered Romish believers his allies. A so-called orthodox Protestant need only perceive immediately that what we have in common with Rome concerns precisely those fundamentals of our Christian creed. . . . I for my part am not ashamed to confess that on many points my views have been clarified through my study of the Romish theologians.” *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), pp. 183–84; quoted in J. Daryl Charles, “Evangelical-Catholic Dialogue: Basis, Boundaries, Benefits,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 3, p. 303. Of course, after Trent the Reformers believed that Rome had apostasized.

3 Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, p. 229.

there is a continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament. And both believe that there is an invisible dimension to the church wherein all the regenerate are united. Indeed, “it is Christ who, through the Holy Spirit, makes Church one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and it is he who calls her to realize each of these qualities.”⁴

In a broad sense, the community of believers on earth, which many Catholics and Protestants call “the church,” can be said to have had its beginning with the inception of humanity. The Christian church did not begin until after Christ said, “I will build [future tense] my church” (Matt. 16:18).⁵ The Second Council of Lyons (A.D. 1274) states: “We believe that the true Church is holy, Catholic, apostolic, and one, in which is given one holy baptism and true remission of all sins.”⁶ Nonetheless, God did have a covenant community in the Old Testament which many call “the church.” Whatever the title—let us call them the people of God—it is evident that God has always been interested in dealing with individuals in the context of a community of believers. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council declared: “It has not been God’s resolve to sanctify and save men individually with no regard for their mutual relationship. Rather he wants to establish them as a people who would give him recognition in truth and service in holiness.”⁷ Thus, we find socialization to be an important factor in the unfolding of the people of God in history.

The English word “church” developed through the German *Kirche*. The Latin word *ecclesia* is derived from the Greek and means “the assembly/community.” In the secular sense, the word means “an assembly of the people, the civil community.” As Ott observes, “The Roman Catechism (I. 10, 2), supported by St. Augustine (Enarr. in Ps. 149:3), gives the following definition of the concept: ‘The Church is the faithful of the whole world.’ ”⁸

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

4 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 811, p. 214.

5 Many evangelicals distinguish God’s earthly people, Israel in the Old Testament, from his heavenly people, the church, which they believe did not begin until after Christ came (cf. Matt. 1:16–18). They believe it began on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) when Christ fulfilled his promise to baptize them in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) which, according to Paul, places believers in one body (1 Cor. 12:13), the church (Eph. 1:22–23). Nonetheless, they acknowledge that both Old and New Testament believers are part of a broader category that may be called the people of God.

6 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma* , para. 464, p. 184.

7 Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, II, 9. See also Hardon, *Catholic Catechism*, p. 206.

8 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 270. Also see *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 3:678.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We have already spoken about the origin of the human race in chapter 3 . Humans were to reproduce themselves, control (or better, “husband”) nature around them, and enjoy fellowship with God (Gen. 2:8–25). This special relationship was shattered by the entrance of sin, which resulted in alienation from God and caused a rupture between human beings (Gen. 4:8 ; 6:11) and the manifestation of selfishness and pride (Gen. 11:8–9).

The events and pronouncements surrounding the election and call of Abram are of great importance concerning the origins of the people of God in the Old Testament, who came to be known as Israel. About this we read:

The Lord said to Abram: “Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you” (Gen. 12:1–3).

This special relationship between God and the people which he was forming was sealed with a covenant. The concept of covenant involved “a bond entered into voluntarily by two parties by which each pledges himself to do something for the other. The idea of the covenant between the God of Israel and His people is fundamental to the religion of the O.T.”⁹

This covenant was renewed with Abraham’s descendants when, under Moses’ direction, they left Egypt (Exod. 19–24). In spite of God’s grace and care, time and again Israel was unfaithful and violated the precepts of God’s law. The prophets foretold that only the portion of the people who remained faithful would experience the benefits of God’s promises.

The days are coming, says the LORD , when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt. . . . But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD . I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people (Jer. 31:31–33).

While many evangelicals believe that this awaits a final future fulfillment in the restored nation of Israel, it is clear that the results of this new covenant, which is based on Christ’s death, are applied in the New Testament to the church (cf. Heb. 8) which Christ said he would found (Matt. 16). However, through the remaining Old Testament period, “These two ideas, the faithful remnant and the new covenant, were reaffirmed during the

⁹ F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 353–54.

centuries following the Babylonian Exile, and they nourished the messianic hopes of Israel (Isa. 54:9 , 10).”¹⁰

Despite intramural evangelical differences on the time of origin and nature of the church, all acknowledge that believers of both Testaments are in one sense the spiritual seed of Abraham, inasmuch as they, like him, are justified by faith. The apostle Paul made the connection between the redeemed of the New Testament and father Abraham: “Thus Abraham ‘believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Realize then that it is those who have faith who are children of Abraham. Scripture, which saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, foretold the good news to Abraham, saying, ‘Through you shall all the nations be blessed.’ Consequently, those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham who had faith” (Gal. 3:6–9).

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Pope Leo the Great, commenting on the birth of the Christian Church and the rending of the temple’s veil, stated: “To such an extent was there effected a transfer from the Law to the Gospel, from the Synagogue to the Church, from many sacrifices to one Victim, that, as our Lord expired, the mystical veil which shut off the innermost part of the temple and its sacred secret was rent violently from top to bottom.”¹¹

The legitimacy of the new covenant was announced by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The nature of this new society, the church, was gradually revealed. The new community was seen as separate from Judaism and having its own structure (cf. Rom. 9:3–4 ; 1 Cor. 10:32). After Christ’s ascension, with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the apostles began to preach to the Jews and to baptize all converts (Acts 2:4–41 ; 4:2). Concerning Christ’s purpose in sending the Holy Spirit, Pope Pius XII declared:

He wished to make known and proclaim his spouse through the visible coming of the Holy Spirit with the sound of a mighty wind and tongues of fire. For just as he himself, when he began to preach, was made known by his eternal Father through the Holy Spirit descending and remaining on him in the form of a dove, so likewise, as the apostles were about to enter on their ministry of preaching, Christ our Lord sent the Holy Spirit down from heaven, to touch them with tongues of fire and to point out, as by the finger of God, the supernatural mission and office of the Church.¹²

In the Book of Acts, Luke details the conversion of Paul, formerly a persecutor of the church. Through the efforts of Paul the gospel was proclaimed to the Gentiles and tensions between Jewish members of the church and these new converts from paganism increased (Acts 15:1–2). The content of the Pauline corpus reveals much about the

¹⁰ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 3:678.

¹¹ Leo, *Sermon LXVIII*, 3; quoted in *Catholic Catechism*, p. 207.

¹² Pius XII, encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, I, 33; quoted in *Catholic Catechism*, p. 208.

nature of the church. From Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus he came to identify the Christian community with Jesus Christ.

The apostles had designated certain members as “deacons” to be in charge of duties such as charitable works, preaching, and prayer (Acts 6:1–7). The believing community “was composed of various local churches whose members were ‘saints,’ chosen by God (1 Cor. 1:2). There was authority in the Church: Peter (Gal. 1:18 ; 2:6–14); the twelve and Paul himself (1 Cor. 15:1–11); Timothy, Titus, and the ‘bishops’ (1 Tim. 1:3–5 ; 3:2 ; Titus 1:7 ; Phil. 1:1 ; Acts 20:28) . . . elders or presbyters (Titus 1:5 ; 1 Tim. 5:17), and deacons (Phil. 1:1).”¹³ These religious communities (called “churches”) were to observe the traditions that Paul brought to them (1 Cor. 11:2 , 23–24 ; 15:1–3 ; Gal. 1:6–10). These doctrines, of course, had their roots in the ministry and teaching of Jesus (1 Cor. 7:10 ; 11:23 ; 2 Cor. 4:5). The rituals of baptism and the Lord's Supper were practiced (Gal. 3:26–27 ; Eph. 4:5 ; 1 Cor. 11:23–24). Baptism provided an identification between the believer and the risen Lord, and participation in the Eucharistic Feast provided similar unity (1 Cor. 10:16–17). Baptism and the conversion experience went hand in hand (Gal. 3:26–27). Faith came through the preaching of the “good news” and its acceptance.¹⁴

THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Building on this biblical foundation, both Catholics and evangelicals have developed a systematic doctrine of the church, or ecclesiology. While there are significant differences (see chaps. 13 and 14), particularly in the make-up of the visible body of Christ on earth, nonetheless, there is more agreement than many evangelicals realize over the nature of the mystical or spiritual body of Christ.

THE MYSTICAL BODY OF CHRIST

When examining the church and its nature and function perhaps the place to start is the church as “the body of Christ.” Pope Pius XII declared: “To describe this true Church of Christ—which is the Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, Roman Church—there is no name more noble, none more excellent, none more Divine, than the expression, ‘the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ.’ ”¹⁵ With the exception of singling out the Roman jurisdiction for special mention, most evangelicals would agree with the above statement. (We will address questions concerning the supremacy of the Roman See in chap. 11 .) The Second

13 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 3:679.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis*, 1943; quoted in Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 270.

Vatican Council states: “Reflection on the pilgrim status of the Church leads naturally to the theme of the Church as the People of God of the new and eternal Covenant.”¹⁶

In the New Testament, we find the apostle Paul using the term “the body of Christ” to depict the spiritual link between Christ and his church. Speaking of God the Father, he says that “he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way” (Eph. 1:22–23). And concerning Christ: “He is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18), and “Now you are Christ’s body and individually parts of it” (1 Cor. 12:27).

This teaching from Scripture is reflected in the church fathers and later in the Middle Ages. Clement said, “It is not unknown to you that I believe that the living Church is the body of Christ.” Augustine, when asked “What is the church?” answered, “The Body of Christ. Add to this, the Head (Christ) and it becomes a man. The head and the body, a man.”¹⁷ In the Middle Ages, the scholastics employed the term “Mystical Body of Christ” to describe the Lord’s Supper. Later, however, the appellation became used in a general sense for the church: “The word ‘mystical’ (full of mystery, i.e., hidden things) indicates the mysterious character of the communion of grace between Christ and the faithful.”¹⁸ Roman Catholics use the term in two senses: “In the wider sense, the designation ‘Mystical Body of Christ’ means the communion of all those made holy by the grace of Christ” including those in heaven. And secondly, “In the narrower sense, the ‘Mystical Body of Christ’ means the visible Church of Christ on earth.”¹⁹

THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

CHRIST AS FOUNDER OF THE CHURCH

Contrary to a popular misunderstanding among many Protestants, Roman Catholicism teaches that “The Church was founded by the God-Man Jesus Christ (*De fide.*)”²⁰ Indeed, the Vatican Council declared in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ that “the eternal Shepherd and Bishop of our souls (1 Peter 2:25) resolved, in order to give permanent duration to the saving work of the Redemption, to establish the Holy Church, in which all the faithful would be welded together as in the house of the Living God, by the bond of the one Faith and of the one Charity.”²¹ Pope Pius X stated

16 “*Lumen Gentium*,” Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, p. 261.

17 Augustine, *Sermon* 45.5.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 271.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 272.

21 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 1821, p. 451.

in 1910 that “the Church was founded immediately and personally by the true and historical Christ during the time of His earthly life.”²²

The question surrounding Christ’s statement to Peter “Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church” (Matt. 16:18) will be briefly addressed later in this chapter. Roman Catholicism takes this statement as a reference to Peter. Some Protestants agree but deny that this proves the primacy of Peter. Most Protestants take the “rock” to mean Peter’s firm testimony about Christ. A number of different interpretations were held by the church fathers (see chap. 11).

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH

Whenever the person and/or the work of the Holy Spirit has been ignored or undervalued, the church has suffered. Many believe that it may well be that God has raised up the charismatic renewal movement (which has impacted both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches) to address this situation. It is of interest then to observe the official position of Roman Catholicism concerning the role of the Holy Spirit vis-à-vis the church: “The Holy Ghost is the Soul of the Church (*Sent. communis.*) ” In the encyclical *Divinum illud* (1897), Leo XIII declared, “Let the one proposition suffice: Christ is the Head of the Church, the Holy Ghost her soul.” Pius XII confirmed this doctrine in the encyclical *Mystici Corporis*,²³ asserting that, like the soul in the body, the Holy Ghost is the principle of being and life in the church.²⁴

The Fathers clearly speak to the intimate relationship that exists between the Holy Spirit and the church. Irenaeus said, “Where the Church is, there also the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace (*Adv. haer. III 24, 1.*) ” Augustine, speaking about the Holy Spirit’s operation in the church: “As the soul quickens every member of the body and bestows a definite function on each, so the Holy Ghost, by His grace, quickens every member of the Church, and allocates to each a definite activity in the service of the whole (*Sermo 267. 4, 4.*)”²⁵ We certainly cannot lay the blame for the neglect of the person and work of the Holy Spirit at the feet of the early church fathers.

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The Church has two dimensions, visible and invisible. The invisible is the spiritual (mystical) body of Christ composed of all true believers. The visible church is the community of Christ’s followers on earth.

22 Ibid.; see also no. 2145.

23 See *ibid.*, no. 2288, p. 616.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 294.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 295.

Our discussion thus far has centered on properties which speak to the inner, invisible side of the church. Its purpose—addressing our spiritual needs—is invisible. The “Energizer” (the Holy Spirit) of the church operates “behind the scenes.”

Thus Pius XII states: “If we examine closely this divine principle of life and power given by Christ . . . we easily see that it is nothing else than the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete who proceeds from the Father and the Son.”²⁶

The external, visible side of the church is a doctrine that is intrinsic to an understanding of the Roman Catholic concept of the church. Concerning the nature of the church, “Catholics are willing to admit that there is an invisible side to the Church, but prefer to reserve the name ‘church’ for the visible communion of believers.”²⁷ Augustine, in comparing the church to a city on a mountain (Matt. 5:14), said, “The Church stands clear and visible before all men, for she is the city on the mountain which cannot be hidden.”²⁸ Evangelicals also believe that the church is visible, existing now in the world. What is at issue is the claim that the Roman Catholic jurisdiction is the only true manifestation of the body of Christ on earth. This is the question of authority over which Catholics and Protestants disagree, which will be addressed in chapter 11 .

BIBLICAL IMAGES FOR THE CHURCH

In addition to the title “the body of Christ,” we find other names in the New Testament used to describe the reality called “the church.” The Body of believers is likened to a sheepfold. In John’s Gospel Jesus says, “I am the gate for the sheep” (10:7). Of course, if the people of God are the sheepfold, then Christ is the Shepherd. He said, “I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11).

Paul uses the images of a field and a building to describe the church. In discussing the role of Christian ministers, he says: “For we are God’s co-workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9). Elaborating on the concept of the church as a building, Paul states that it is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cap stone” (Eph. 2:20). This is a pivotal verse when attempting to understand the nature of the church and will be examined in chapter 11 .

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH

The visible church is constituted of all the regenerate but it has a structure. Not all have the same gifts, and not all have the same authority. In New Testament language, there are “bishops,” “elders,” “deacons,” and just plain “brethren” (laity). Catholics call “elders” ministers and priests.

²⁶ Encyclical, “*Mystici Corporis*” (1943), Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith* , p. 255.

²⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 562.

²⁸ Augustine, *Contra Clesonium* II.36.45; quoted in *ibid.*

It is evident that the church which Christ founded was to have a visible manifestation. Evangelicals, along with Catholics, believe that the church is composed not only of laity (who Catholics acknowledge are called “saints” [Eph. 1:1] and “priests” [1 Pet. 2:9] in Scripture) but of ministers. These ministers lead, teach, and offer sacraments (or ordinances) in the church.

Roman Catholics, in contrast to most Protestants (high Anglicans excepted), base their hierarchical structure on the premise of “apostolic succession.” This doctrine is: “The sequence, following from the apostles themselves down to the bishops of the present time. This is marked (a) by lawful, valid ordination conferred on bishops of the Church; (b) by the giving over or delegating directly the powers entrusted to the apostles of ordaining, or ruling, and of teaching, which powers were given by Christ to the apostles.”²⁹

The underpinning which holds the structure of Roman Catholicism together is the doctrine that designates the apostle Peter as the chief of all the apostles. Further, Catholics believe this primacy was conferred on the bishops of Rome, Peter’s successors: “The invisible Head of the Church is the risen Christ. St. Peter represents the position of Christ in the external government of the militant Church, and is to this extent ‘the representative of Christ’ on earth (*Christi vicarius*; D. 694).”³⁰

The scriptural support used by Roman Catholics for the doctrine of the primacy of Peter is found in Matthew 16 . After Peter confesses that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” Jesus states: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:17–18).

The problem here turns on the meaning of the word “rock.” Because Peter is called *Petros* (which means “rock” in Greek) Roman Catholics believe Jesus was designating Peter in a special way as the human foundation for the visible church. This authority, they claim, was passed on to his successors, the bishops of Rome. Most Protestants believe that Jesus was declaring here that the church will be built upon the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord (cf. Matt. 16:18 ; Eph. 2:20). This is an area rife with difficulties, not only for evangelicals but also Eastern Orthodox communities. The issue will be explored more fully in chapter 11 .

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

Roman Catholicism teaches that “as the local Church must represent the universal Church as perfectly as possible, it must remember that it has been sent to those who live in the same territory as itself, but do not believe in Christ so that it might be for them, by the

29 Robert C. Broderick, M.A., ed., “Apostolic Succession,” in *The Catholic Concise Encyclopedia* (St. Paul: Simon & Schuster, 1956), p. 43.

30 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 279.

example of the lives of the faithful and of the whole community, a sign indicating Christ.”³¹ Concerning the mission of redemption that the church must exercise, Catholics claim that, “while Christ acquired the fruits of the Redemption by His own efficacy, the task of the Church consists in the application of the fruits of the Redemption to mankind.” Of course “this is achieved by the exercise of the three-fold office delegated to the Church by Christ—the teaching office, the pastoral office and the sacerdotal office. Thus the Church is Christ continuing and perpetually working on earth.”³² Although some of the ecclesiastical machinery involved in the Roman Catholic understanding of the above task may be problematic, the general goal would be acceptable to most evangelicals. Pope John Paul II stated in his first encyclical that the central purpose of the church was to help the believer to “realize and fulfill his full human destiny in Christ.”³³

As to the purpose of the church, the most recent catechism states: “The mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit is brought to completion in the Church, which is the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. This joint mission henceforth brings Christ’s faithful to share in his communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit.”³⁴

AREAS OF CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT AGREEMENT³⁵

We have found much in common with our Roman Catholic friends concerning the nature and mission of the church. This unity begins with a common confession of the great ecumenical creeds.

CREEDAL UNITY

There is, of course, a basic doctrinal unity between Catholics and Protestants at the foundation of the church. “Each of the major churches accepted the great ecumenical creeds, the Apostles’, Nicene, and Chalcedonian symbols [creeds], and was persuaded that the doctrine they express is both true and necessary. They differed among themselves about *what else* might be required, but there was no doubt among them that at least the doctrines of the ecumenical creeds were required.”³⁶ Historically, four marks of the true church have been identified by Protestant scholars.

31 Austin Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Collection: Vatican Council II*, vol. 2 (North Port: Costello Publishing, 1982), p. 836.

32 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, p. 274.

33 “*Redemptor Hominis*” (1979), Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, p. 266.

34 *Catechism 1994*, no. 737, p. 194.

35 Of course, the Roman Catholic (and Orthodox) understanding of unity includes not only invisible/spiritual unity but also visible/institutional unity.

36 Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ*, p. 411.

The church is one. The church is one because Christ is one. “One body and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4–5) appears in both Protestant and Roman Catholic Bibles. Both agree that the final ground for the unity of the church is not in anything people have done or ever can do for themselves, but in what God has done for people in Christ.³⁷

The church is holy. Indeed, the attribute of holiness seems to have been the earliest term applied to the church, for a very early version of the creed reads: “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy church.” All Christians, Roman and non-Roman, would agree that the church is holy, but they would disagree about the specific meaning and content of its holiness.³⁸

The church is catholic. “Catholicity . . . means identity plus universality. The ancient church became the catholic church when it achieved this combination.”³⁹ Evangelicals who recite the Apostles’ Creed understand catholicity as indicating the broad scope of the body of Christ, extending to the ends of the earth and encompassing every “tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

*The church is apostolic.*⁴⁰ “Protestants . . . tend to say that the criterion of apostolic authority is loyalty to the apostolic scriptures of the New Testament. The church is apostolic because and insofar as it obeys the apostolic message in the Scriptures.”⁴¹ Evangelicals can learn much from church history and the Catholic tradition. A Reformed pastor, commenting on some of the superficial examples of worship forms in some evangelical churches, said, “worship is not entertainment for believers. It is not designed to make us feel good, though it can and often does. Worship is designed to be entertaining to God, to please and delight Him. God is the audience in worship.”⁴²

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, Catholics and evangelicals have much in common on the origin, nature, and purpose of the church. This is true both doctrinally and organically, especially with regard to the invisible church.

37 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), p. 178. This work is highly recommended for its balanced approach to the development of Roman Catholicism.

38 Ibid., p. 181.

39 Ibid., p. 184.

40 It should be noted that the Roman Catholic and Orthodox understanding of apostolicity is not only apostolic Scripture/doctrine but also apostolic succession.

41 Ibid., p. 187.

42 Peter J. Leithart, “A Presbyterian Appreciation of Liturgy,” *Crisis* (October 1992): 30–32.

One of the burning issues of the Reformation was the nature of the church. The notion was that “the church of the sixteenth century was seen by Rome as an institution that stood *between* the people and God, whereas Luther and others argued that the church indeed was the very people of God.”⁴³

Even given their somewhat different understanding of the function of the *visible* church, Roman Catholics are not unaware of the sinfulness of the church. Cardinal Ratzinger states, “the Second Vatican Council itself ventured to the point of speaking no longer merely of the holy Church but of the sinful Church, and the only reproach it incurred was that of still being far too timorous.”⁴⁴ Not all evangelicals are prepared to go as far as one contemporary evangelical theologian, Donald Bloesch, who claims that “in addition to upholding evangelical distinctives, we need to regain catholic substance, which means continuity with the tradition of the whole church, including its sacramental side.” Even noted Reformed apologist R. C. Sproul observes the absence of incense in Protestant churches. Why should not our sensibilities to worship God be stimulated by our senses as well as our eyes (beautiful buildings) and ears (beautiful music)?

As to the role of the church, Bloesch notes that “the Church is not a mediator between God and man, but it is a veritable means of grace to man. It cannot dispense grace as though it were in control, but it can function as an instrument of the Holy Spirit who does convey the grace of Christ to a sinful world.”⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the current situation finds the church (in all of its various manifestations) struggling to preserve doctrinal integrity and ecclesiastical orderliness. As evangelical thinker Harold O. J. Brown puts it: “In today’s intellectual climate, the ordinary safeguards of church membership qualifications, ordination, theological degrees, and the like mean virtually nothing.”⁴⁶ The purity of the church is still crucial, however, for “the responsibility for preserving it is no longer adequately exercised by church officials, and now devolves upon the individual believer.”⁴⁷ We will be addressing this situation in Parts Two and Three.

Finally, concerning the church and her relationship with Christ, a contemporary Roman Catholic layman offers the following observation: “The Church, the Bride, should be speaking of her beloved, the Bridgroom: about how wonderful he is, about how she

43 J. Daryl Charles, “Evangelical-Catholic Dialogue: Basis, Boundaries, Benefits,” *Pro Ecclesia*, vol. III, no. 3, 1994, p. 295 n. 20.

44 Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p. 262.

45 Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 278. Many evangelicals view confession as an unnecessary Roman Catholic accretion. However, at least one evangelical scholar who is a specialist in Patristics finds much value in the function of auricular confession. See Thomas C. Oden, *Corrective Love: The Power of Communion Discipline* (St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1995), pp. 57, 60, 73–77.

46 Brown, *Protest of a Troubled Protestant*, p. 239.

47 *Ibid.*

owes everything to him, about how good he is and how truthful and faithful and powerful and glorious.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Ralph Martin, *The Catholic Church at the End of an Age: What Is the Spirit Saying?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), p. 199.