

THE CHURCH (Part I)

On 19th June 325AD, in the presence of the Emperor Constantine, approximately three hundred ‘bishops’ from throughout the Christian world met to confront certain difficulties that had arisen. The main problem arose from the teachings of a man called Arius and he had been influencing the people through sermons, writings, popular hymns and songs; he was teaching them that the Lord Jesus was a pure creature, made out of nothing, liable to fall/sin, the Son of God by adoption, not by nature, and called God in Scripture, not as being really such, but only in name. He said of Christ, “There was a time when He was not”. This, of course, is an outright heresy and is one of the foundational doctrines of, - for example, - the Russellites, Jehovah Witnesses.

Indeed, the Church was in crisis, - it was necessary for them to draw up a clear and unequivocal doctrinal basis. The presence of Constantine, however, was a ‘complication’. He became the emperor of Rome in 306AD. In 312 he went to war against his brother-in-law and co-emperor, Maxentius. Now, Constantine was an idol worshipper who had heard of the emergence of Christianity. Fearing defeat at the Battle of Milvian Bridge he sought divine guidance ... from any quarter! While he was praying for such guidance he experienced a vision in which he saw a cross of light at midday; the cross, - Christian symbol, - bore the inscription, *in hoc signo vinces* (“in this sign you will be victorious”). This dream “from God” told him to wear the symbol of the cross as a safeguard in all of his battles. He was consequently victorious in the battle of the Milvian Bridge, and he continued to wear the cross in every war in which he was engaged (cf. Crusaders tunic).

His “conversion” to Christianity has great significance. Not all church historians are of the mind he was truly converted ... and the more you consider their evidence the more convincing their point of view is. Nevertheless, his “conversion” to Christ, - whether it was true or not, - does indeed have great implications.

Prior to the “conversion” Constantine was an idol worshipper, in particular, he worshipped the “sun God”. When he “converted” the empire *adopted* Constantine’s Christianity. If you wanted to succeed in places of influence (e.g. government departments, local councils, the army, etc.) your opportunities were enhanced if you were a “Christian”.

Also, many of the temples underwent change; they were “adopted” to become churches. It is important to point out that these former idolatrous temples changed into churches overnight and they retained much of the fabric and content; indeed, the superstition of idolatry made its way into their worship.

For example, the former temples kept their idols (after all, they were too sacred to discard!); instead of destroying the old idols they were given new names, - St. James, St. Paul, St. John, etc. – and the old powers the old idols were believed to have had were now transferred to the images of these new saints (e.g. instead of praying to the old idols, the people now prayed to these new ‘saints’. You would touch these images/saints and they were promised to help you).

Also, in the centre of the temple was the *altar* to their particular idol. Of course, Christianity had a similar altar, - the Eucharist, the Lord’s Table, - and therefore it was considered not necessary to get rid of the old altar, - just give it a new name. But, in the same way as before, the people held on to some of their old idolatrous beliefs, - they considered it to have some magical and supernatural elements ... so much so that when their local bishop/elder or highly esteemed church leader died he was buried underneath the altar, thereby giving it increasing ecclesiastical status.

Why am I telling you all this? Simply to emphasise the fact that when these three hundred bishops met at Nicaea they were seeking to draw up a Confession of Faith, faithful to the teachings of the Apostles, in order to eradicate traditions or doctrines contrary to the Scriptures. The Nicene Creed was completed in the way we know it in Constantinople, 381AD... I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And I believe in the Holy Ghost the Lord, and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets. **And I**

believe in one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Through all the divisions that arose out of Arianism, and the compromises of Constantine's state-adopted Christianity the bishops taught, "I believe in one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church". Unfortunately, such a term has been hijacked by Roman Catholicism and we, - as Protestants, - shy away from using it in its proper meaning.

But as our *Baptist Confession of Faith* explains this "catholic or universal church ... consists of the whole number of the elect who have been, who are being, or who yet shall be gathered into one under Christ Who is the Church's Head". ... First of all ...

WHO IS IN THIS CHURCH?

* It is tremendously important to hold to a Biblical doctrine of the Church ("ecclesiology"). In order to assess who is our brothers and sisters in the Lord we ought to know the 'entrance requirements', otherwise the Church can become a title that doesn't really mean anything

* The Bible uses such terms to describe the true members of the Church as "redeemed", "born again", "saved", "converted", "in Christ".

* The Bible teaches the Church is made up from those who God unconditionally and irresistibly calls to Himself through grace, e.g.

* Is. 45:4 For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me. 5 I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: 6 That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none beside me. I am the LORD, and there is none else.

* Eph. 1:4 he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: 5 Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

* I Peter 1:2 Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.

* In the same way that we love Christ because He first loved us, we chose Christ because He first chose us.

* Someone said to me recently they could not believe God would choose some to be saved and not choose others; well, that is *exactly* what He did! If God had not chosen me to be saved, I would not be saved!

* Every member of the Church of Christ has been chosen in eternity and the blood of Christ at Calvary atoned for our sin, - He became our Propitiation, by which He took upon Himself the wrath of God; Christ satisfied completely the righteous judgement our sin demanded.

* This Church for whom He paid the ransom He will one day, - in its entirety, - present before His Father. It will not be missing any, it will be complete ... and the basis for each member of His Bride is the eternal saving love of God, demonstrated through free and Sovereign grace.

WHAT ARE ITS FUNDAMENTALS?

* There are those folk who believe that all you need to say is “Jesus is Lord” and you are a Christian. They quote, [Rom. 10:9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," ... you will be saved.](#) (NIV) In some ways, it is akin to Islam that teaches all you need to say to become a Muslim is “Allah is God”.

* The fundamentals of being a Christian are exact and unnegotiable. [Rom. 10:9, - even in the NIV, - actually says, That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.](#) [V. 10 continues, For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.](#)

* *Saying* you are a Christian must be supported by a changed life that demonstrates you *are* a Christian.

* There are indeed many different types of church fellowships, - for example, the Methodists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, non-denominational ... we each have doctrines we put higher up the list than others ... but at ‘the top of the list’ – in order for us to belong to the true Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, - we need to have turned to Him, repented of our sin, believe in Him for personal salvation, and we need to uphold and practise the Faith based upon His most Holy Word.

* We might have different views on baptism, the constituency of the church, tongues and gifts, end times ... but at the core of what we believe ... in order to be saved and united in Christ we *must* believe in the Gospel of salvation that teaches, [Rom. 5:8 God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.](#)

* This was the same message taught by the apostles, the early church and the Reformers.

* The absolute fundamentals of our faith are absolutely non-negotiable!

IS THERE A FALSE CHURCH?

* The Christian Church today is said to be the world's largest religion with over 2.1 billion followers. In Britain 72% of the population say they are 'Christians' (41 million 'Christians').

* Now ... bear in mind the words of Jesus in *Mt. 7:21* Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. *22* Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? *23* And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

* What if someone says they are a believer and they cast doubt on the Word of God?

* What if someone says they are a believer and they deny the substitutionary death of Christ? What if they deny, - like Arius, - Jesus was truly the Son of God? What if they say Jesus never rose from the dead? What if they say we can be saved through our own good works?

* **Is there a false church?** Of course there is. Almost as long as the true Church has been in existence, the false church has been in existence too. ... It has a different gospel, - man-made, man-sufficient, man-content. (... It's a Biblical fact that the devil always likes to try and imitate God and His ways.)

* The false gospel has its own conception of who/what God is and he is a God of their own imagination. In this context the angel to the church at Smyrna spoke about *the synagogue of Satan (Rev. 2:9; 3:9)*.

* In the New Testament there were the Judaizing Christians, the Gnostics, the antinomians, the various flavours of a deformed view of Christianity, and there were also those who followed men. ... There has always been the false church alongside the true Church.

* The First Epistle of John teaches there are many antichrists ... and an antichrist is simply someone who puts himself in the place of Christ (*Mt. 2:22* in the room of, **ajtiw**) When someone takes it upon themselves to teach doctrines that can not be substantiated by Scripture they are putting themselves in the place reserved only for God and His Word!

* Our *Baptist Confession of Faith*, is in full agreement with the Church of England's *Thirty-Nine Articles*, the Presbyterian *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Methodism's *Forty-Four Sermons*, the Congregational *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order 1658*, the

Lutheran *Helvetic Confession* (1562) when it teaches the historic Protestant truth that “the Pope of Rome ... is the antichrist, described in Scripture as ‘the man of sin’, ‘the son of perdition’, who ‘exalts himself’ in the Church against Christ and ‘above all that is called God’, whom ‘the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of His coming’”.

* This truth has never changed and the Roman antichrist fulfils that roll exactly. Some would accuse us of bigotry ... but this is not bigotry; this is the historic teaching of the Church since Reformation times.

* We don’t need to give any further time to this subject of the false church just now but we need to be aware of its existence and not be frightened to condemn or stand up against that which contradicts the glorious truths of the unadulterated Word of God.

* The Bible says the false church, - in all its various guises, - has a [form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away \(II Tim. 3:5\)](#).

WHO DOES THE CHURCH BELONG TO?

* The Church is Christ’s. He purchased it; the Church is His Bride. God chose it, the Son redeemed it, and the Holy Spirit dwells in it.

* Its master is not a synod of bishops or a conclave of cardinals ... the Church is God’s, [Zech. 2:8 For thus saith the LORD of hosts; After the glory hath he sent me unto the nations which spoiled you: for he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye.](#)

* Our one Father is the Jehovah God of the Old Testament, - the same God as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah and the Prophets; He is the same God of the New Testament ... of Peter, John, James, and Paul.

* ... The Church is His; it belongs to Him; He purchased it.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

* The *Confession* says rightly that the Lord Jesus “calls to Himself out of the world those who are given to Him by His Father, that they may live in His sight, rendering Him the obedience prescribed by Him for them in the Scripture”.

* The purpose of each member of the Redeemed Church is to live to the glory of God. It is a privilege to be saved! If you are truly saved, it is an honour you enjoy!

* Hell does not await you at the end of this life, - your sins are not piling up against your name.

- * Christ has entered your life ... you are His, He is yours. You live each day knowing if He should come back for you that you will enjoy His company forever.
- * Indeed, you live each day *in anticipation of* His return. You want to hold yourself in a manner that testifies of His saving grace.
- * ... And you are not an isolated believer; the Bible teaches you and I are an integral part of His Church, the *Confession* says, “He commands those thus called to form particular societies or churches to promote their common welfare, and to engage in the public worship which He requires them to carry on while they continue in the world”.
- * Within this redeemed Church of Christ is the proper teaching, fellowship and all the opportunities for service together as God’s people.
- * God has a purpose for His Church ... and the purpose is to show forth His Glory.

Conclusion

- * In our study this evening we have considered much that is foundational to our faith. The following paragraphs in this chapter emphasise the workings and the practices of the church, and the responsibilities of its members to God and to each other.
- * I trust you feel privileged to belong to Him and to the great number of His people that He will gather some day in all its completeness around the Throne in Heaven. May this doctrine of the Church encourage us in our daily walk with Him.