




LESSON ONE

THE CHURCH

What is the Church?

"The Church is the Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head, and all baptized people are the members" (BCP 290).¹

I am a member of the Church because I was called by the grace of God, in the power of the Holy Ghost, to faith in Jesus Christ and baptized in water, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. See John 3:1-8; Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Ephesians 2:8-10; and Romans 6:3-12, especially:

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4).²

Why is the Church called the Body of Christ?

All human beings are members ("organs," "cells," "integral parts") of one of two bodies of humanity. The first body, the body of the first man Adam, is dead because of Adam's sin. The second body, the Body of Jesus Christ, is resurrected from death by the power of God and is alive forever.³

The word "church" (perhaps originating as a Germanic corruption of the Greek for "the Lord's House": Oxford English Dictionary) is used in English to translate the Greek word in the original of the New Testament that means "those who have been called out" (ekklesia).⁴ The Church is made up of all those people who have been called out of the dead body of Adam, by the grace of God, and have been transplanted into the Living Body of Jesus Christ.

St. Paul explains in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter 12, that because the Church is the living, breathing Body of Christ, each one of us who is baptized into Christ

is a member of that Body with his own particular job to do for the welfare of the rest of the Body.

Don't make the mistake of thinking of "membership" in political or institutional terms. "Member" is a physical term, as well. Insurance policies still speak of the loss of an eye or a leg as "dismemberment." The members of the Church are the "flesh and bones" of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:30).

What is the Catholic Church?

The Catholic Church is the Church of the Holy Scriptures (promised in the Old Testament and established in the New), the only Church founded by Jesus Christ himself to be his Body.⁵

The Catholic Church is the Church of the Gospels: the historic Church announced by Christ in his preaching; instituted by the Last Supper, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension; and confirmed by the anointing of the Holy Ghost on Pentecost.

One working definition of the Catholic Church is found in the XLXth Article of Religion (BCP 606):

The visible Church of Christ [that is, on earth] is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance [commandment], in all those things that of necessity are requisite [required] to the same.⁶

Another working definition is found in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds (BCP 15). It is called "The Four Notes of the Church."⁷ The Four Notes agree exactly with our previous definition because they state that the Church is "one," "holy," "catholic," and "apostolic" (see the Second Office of Instruction, BCP 291).

The Church is one because there is only one Body under one Head, namely Jesus Christ. Christ only started one Church. We are members of it, or we are not (see Ephesians 4:4-6).

The Church is holy because it is Christ's Body and the Holy Ghost dwells in it, making its members holy by the grace of God (see Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; and Ephesians 5:25-27).

The Church is catholic (from the Greek for "with, by, in, and through the whole") because it holds the entire Faith, containing all things necessary for salvation as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, for all people in all times and in all places. Another word for catholic is "universal," not because everyone in the world is automatically a member of the Church, but because all those who are saved belong to the Church, and because the Church is the one means of salvation that God has provided for his human creatures (see Genesis 22:18; Luke 2:10-11; Acts 17:24-31; and Hebrews 13:8).

The Church is apostolic because it continues in the Apostles' teaching, fellowship, and ministry, as they were delivered to the Apostles by Christ and the Holy Ghost (see John 20:21-23; and Acts 2:42).

What is the Christian Religion?

The Christian religion is the following of Jesus Christ (see Matthew 16:24-25; and John 14:15). The disciples of Jesus Christ were first called "Christians" (Christ-followers) in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The name Christians was likely a term of derision at first, since the disciples persisted in imitating someone who was by the wisdom of this fallen world an executed carpenter.

When you are asked your religion, the correct answer is "Christian," rather than the name of our particular branch of Christ's Church. Other "religions" are, for example, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, and Humanism.

The word "religion" comes from the Latin *religare*, "to tie together," "to bind up." We get our English word "rely" from the same Latin word. Every human being has a set of beliefs that he relies on to hold his life together, even if it is only a belief in himself.⁸ A Christian relies on Jesus Christ to make sense out of his life and to preserve it forever.

Are all Christians members of the Catholic Church?

As we saw at the beginning of this lesson, all baptized people are the members of Christ's Church, and the Catholic Church is the only Church there is.

But what about the various "denominations"?

This question is rather harder to answer, not because God has made his Church very complicated, but because the sins of the Church's members have complicated the life of the

Church. Remember: Christ alone is without sin (Romans 3:23-25; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:21-24). The members of his Body are redeemed sinners, but imperfect nevertheless, and it is by Christ's Name alone that we are saved, and not by the name ("denomination" comes from the Latin for "name") of our particular Church.⁹

First, we must distinguish between "differences" and "divisions." All differences among Christians are not the result of sin, and they do not need to divide the Church, any more than the differences between one household of a family and another have to divide the family or set its members at odds.¹⁰

For example, the Old Israel, sometimes called "the Old Testament Church," was made up of twelve distinct tribes or extended households of the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, named after the sons of Jacob (Israel). When the tribes fought among themselves, it wasn't their descent from different brothers that caused the strife, but their own sins against the unity of their one family.

Another way of describing God's Israel (his Church) is to call it a vine (Psalm 80:8). The New Israel, the Church of the New Testament, is founded, not in a human family, but in the Body of the Son of God: "I am the vine, and ye are the branches" (John 15:5).¹¹

That there are branches of the Catholic Church, and families of faith within it, cannot be a sin in and of itself because of God's use of families and Christ's teaching of the vine. A difference between one branch of the Church and another is not a sin, any more than it is a sin for three parishes in the same branch of the Church to schedule their Sunday services at different times.

Sin comes in when one family of faith, or one branch, attempts to dominate all the others, or to exclude the others from the Body of Christ. In effect, such an attempt is a claim by that branch that its human founders were the founders of the Church, and not Jesus Christ. It is the sin of presumption, and anti-catholic, for a branch to insist that it is the entire vine.¹²

The sin of division amongst the branches of the Vine of Christ is called "schism" (from the Greek for "cleft" or "division"). Sadly, the great branches of the Catholic Church, the Roman Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Anglican Churches, and the Old

Catholic Churches are in a state of general schism today. Another name for this tragedy is "an internal schism," because all these branches are undoubtedly "within" the Church, within the Body of Christ, even if they lack earthly unity.

But there is an even worse disaster called "an external schism" or "apostasy" (from the Greek "to stand apart"). Apostasy is a decision by an individual or an entire branch of the Church to reject some basic truth of the Christian religion: to separate completely from the Vine of Christ. Those who ignore the pleas of the rest of the Church and enter into apostasy cut themselves off from the Body of Christ and eternal life (Hebrews 11:6).¹³

The final complication is the fallenness of the world. Every household of faith forms an "institution" or a "corporation" (from the Latin for "body"), as a sort of "artificial" body to do its work on earth. But just as our God-created bodies can war against themselves in disease, humanly manufactured "bodies" can become sick. Some people who claim to be Christians simply are not, regardless of their institutional membership (see Galatians 2:4-5). Some institutions that contain real Christians are not truly Christian themselves.

The only real solution to these problems is the one that God provides: "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). Does a person or a group of people profess all the Faith of Jesus Christ as contained in the Scriptures and bear the fruits of Christian living? Does a group that calls itself a "church" meet the Scriptural tests of the working definitions given earlier in this lesson? If they do, then they are Christians, and they belong to a branch of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

Can anyone be a Christian without belonging to the Church?

No, since the Church is the Body of Christ. We cannot be Christians without Christ (see John 15:5).

Can people who are not members of the Church be saved?

No, because only the members of the Body of Christ share eternal life with him. Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). Moreover, St. Peter, "filled with the Holy Ghost," proclaims: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:8,12).

Jesus Christ has commanded us to be members of his Body if we wish to be saved. We cannot say that we believe and obey Jesus Christ if we deny his word and refuse to obey his commandment that all people be baptized and become members of his Body.

Precisely because we are Christians, we do not take any pleasure in the danger of damnation of others. Our own salvation, after all, is not something we do, but a gift of God's mercy, so we can't have any pride in our membership in the Church. We can hope that God will have mercy on those who do not profess Christ, but there is little or no Scriptural basis for this hope, and its sentimentality may get in the way of our accepting our duty to pray and work to bring others to Christ. God has already provided the Church for the salvation of all mankind. It is unfair to God for us to blame him for our own failures to do our Christian duty.

Two ancient heresies (false teachings) that have been revived in modern times suggest that some or all will be given a "second chance" to profess Christ, either by reincarnation or by being given a chance to believe the Gospel after death. But we know these beliefs are impossible, since we read in the Bible: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).¹⁴

How could the divided branches of the Christian Church be brought together?

The Church would be visibly united on earth if we all adopted the standards used in heaven. A short summary of these standards was produced by the Anglican Communion in the 1880s, named for the places where the meetings were held to discuss it: "The Chicago/Lambeth Quadrilateral."¹⁵ A "quadrilateral" is a four-sided figure, in this case an effort to describe the spiritual boundaries of the Kingdom of God, something like the edges of a map.

The four sides of the Quadrilateral are the truth that the Bible contains all things necessary for salvation, and that the Church must not teach or require anything not warranted by the Bible; that the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds are true and sufficient summaries of what the Bible teaches and the Church must believe; that the two sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Communion have been instituted by Christ and commanded for everyone who will be saved; and that the true ministry of the Church is that ministry

founded in the Apostles by Christ as a safeguard against merely human invention and teaching.

What is my bounden duty as a member of the Church?

"My bounden duty is to follow Christ, to worship God every Sunday in his Church; and to work and pray and give for the spread of his kingdom" (BCP 291).¹⁶

What is our branch of the Church?

Churches that had their beginning in the missionary work of the Church of England, whose own beginnings are traceable back to the first century Christian mission to the British Islands. The word Anglican simply means "English," in the same way that we speak of the English language. It is a historical term, rather than an ethnic one. There are about 65 million Anglicans in the world today.¹⁷

What is "the Continuing Church Movement"?

Until the War of Independence (1776-1783), Anglicans in what became the United States of America were simply members of the Church of England. After the Treaty of Paris of 1783 formalized American independence, the Anglican Church in the United States reorganized as the Protestant Episcopal Church. "Protestant" meant that this branch of the Church was not under the authority of the Bishop of Rome; and "Episcopal" (from the Greek word for "bishops": episkopoi) indicated that this American Church intended to remain a faithful branch of the historic Catholic Church.¹⁸

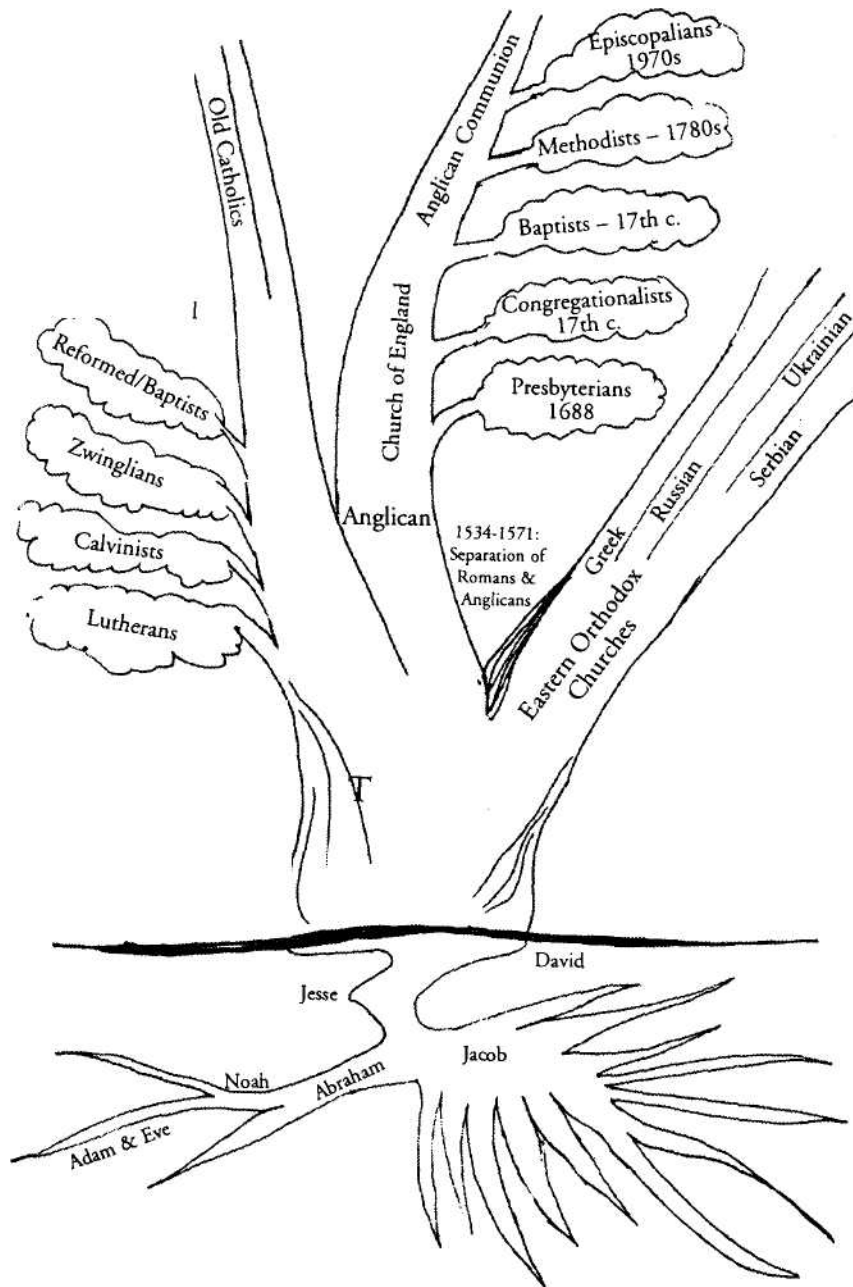
Until the 1970s, most Anglicans in our country were members of "the Episcopal Church." There was, however, an Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America, as well as the Reformed Episcopal Church, which was begun in the 1870s and continues today. But, as we learned above, the human institutions that are meant to serve a branch of Christ's Church can sometimes become diseased. This was the case with the institution called "the Episcopal Church." The leaders of that institution began to attack the teaching of the Bible itself. They introduced unbiblical practices into "the Episcopal Church" and demanded that all "Episcopalians" take part in them.

FIGURE ONE is a very simplified chart of Church history, showing the roots of the New Testament Church in the creation of Adam and Eve, Noah and his descendants, the call of

Abraham, the sons of Jacob (Israel), and Christ's descent from Jesse through David (see Isaiah 11:1).

The general history of the Church of Christ is shown as three main branches diverging after the undivided Church of the first thousand years. The sub-branches represent the movements and churches that have claimed a separate identity since the time of the 16th century Reformation. The dates given for the sub-branches stemming from the Anglican branch indicate the time of their institutional separation from Anglican churches.¹⁹ The theological differences involved are serious and complex, and require respectful study. Also remember that this is a chart of historical relationships, rather than ecclesiastical validity.

Figure One: The Church's History illustrated as a tree



It became necessary, in order to preserve the Anglican branch of the Catholic

Church in the United States, to form new institutions to serve the faithful members of Christ's Body. These have been called "the Continuing Church" because their purpose is not to do or to teach anything new, but to continue the faith and practice required by God of all members of his Church.

The outcome of this ministry to faithful Anglicans in the United States is not yet clear, because God is giving us new opportunities to serve him every day, not just in ministering to those who are already Anglicans, abandoned or rejected by their former institution, but in calling new people to Christ.²⁰

We do know that now there are Continuing Churches in other countries as well (Canada, Australia, India, Ireland, etc.), wherever human institutions have failed to keep the Faith and to serve the Anglican Branch of Christ's one Church. We can say, in all honesty, that we are part of a world-wide Anglican revival: a renewal of faith, a renewal of our mission to worship Christ and to preach his Gospel.

FIGURE TWO is a generalized church plan, including furnishings common in Anglican churches.

The general form of the building is based on the Roman basilica (from the Greek word for "king"), a type of public building that served as the model for later churches, law courts, theatres, and classrooms.²¹ The extensions called "transepts" make the building cross-shaped ("cruciform") in honor of the cross of Christ.

The structure of this sort of church attempts to do two things. The first is a recreation of the order of the ancient Temple. Thus, for example, the sanctuary corresponds to the Holy of Holies. The second, and obviously related to the first, is the visual representation of Christian worship as service in a king's court, in this case the King of Heaven.

This sort of architectural use of space should be understood as the Church's reclaiming in Christ, for the purpose of giving glory to his Father, the dominion over the material world that mankind lost through sin (see Genesis 1:28). The church building becomes, in effect, an embassy of heaven, set apart to help the faithful meditate on the throne of God's glory and the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb (see, for example, Revelation 4 and 19:6-9).

Given the fallenness of human nature, however, it is unreasonable to expect this use of

symbolism to function on its own. Christians should study the usages of their branch of the Church, recalling constantly that their purpose is to honor God. They must not allow any Church practice to become an end in itself, for that would be idolatry.²²

