

In Search Of The New Testament Church

By Mark D. Steele

The question is “why is church membership important if we have Jesus?” I would like to answer this by answering two other questions. First, if Timothy, of New Testament fame, came to earth from Heaven and went around looking for the Church, what clues would help him to identify the Church of the New Testament? Second, assuming that Timothy could identify a modern Church as the Church of the New Testament, does it really matter whether or not we join it?”

If Timothy were to step through a time warp looking for the Church, it make sense that he would look for a Church with the characteristics of the one he was familiar with from the late Apostolic period. So let’s look to the Bible for clues to the nature of the Church.

The Christ-like Church

If a church is to be Christian, it should be “Christ-like” as “Christian” means “like Christ”. Jesus promised that His Church would be like a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. Being visible and unable to be hidden is one way in which the Church is like Christ. In Jesus’ day, people could reject Him, revile Him, or accept Him – but they could not easily ignore Him. He was a sign of contradiction and His Church should be recognizable for the same reason. His Church today should be standing uncompromisingly for the truth (both moral and doctrinal) and people’s response to it should usually be rejection, revulsion, or acceptance – but seldom indifference.

The Church should be visible and recognizable and to deny this is similar to denying that Jesus physically came to earth in a recognizable body. The Church is Christ’s Body and should stand out in the ways that Jesus stood out. Jesus stood out in the following ways by:

- speaking with authority (unlike the scribes and Pharisees),
- claiming to be the master of the Sabbath and the Law,
- forgiving and retaining sins (Jesus forgave the man lowered through the roof but said that the Pharisees would be judged more harshly than Sodom),

Likewise, the Biblical Church acted like Jesus by:

- **claiming the authority to speak for God:** In Luke 10:16, Jesus said that anyone who rejected the Apostles, rejected Him. He also said that the Holy Spirit would guide the Church into all truth. In Acts 15:28, Peter said that it seemed right to them and to the Holy Spirit and clearly expected this apostolic decision to be obeyed and binding on all Christians. Throughout his epistles, Paul repeatedly made it clear that his authority came from God.
- **acting as the master of the Sabbath and the Law:** The early Church changed the Sabbath for Christians from Saturday to Sunday to commemorate Christ’s resurrection. In Acts and throughout Paul’s letters, the Apostles clearly demonstrated decision-making authority concerning other aspects of the Law such as circumcision and eating unclean meats.
- **forgiving and retaining sins:** In Matthew 16 and 18, Jesus first gave Peter and then the other Apostles the authority to forgive or retain sins. In Acts 5, Peter retained Sapphira’s sin and said to her that because she lied to them and to the Holy Spirit she would die like her husband. In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul said that the apostles have been given the ministry of reconciling men to God. James 5:16 tells us to confess our sins, one to another, so that we can be forgiven. John 1:9 states that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from unrighteousness. He said this between two verses where he is specifically referring to speaking or verbal communication (e.g. if we “say” that we have no sin, we lie).

The early Church exercised the authority that it had been granted by Christ in order to carry out His mission to make disciples of all nations. The Bible is clear that the early Church was recognizable because it was Christ-like and exercised His authority on earth. Timothy would look for a Church that continued to exercise the authority that bishops such as he and Titus received from Paul (1 Timothy 1:3, Titus 1:5).

To The Church In ...

The Bible is also clear that in the days of the apostles there was only one Church and history is clear that this remained the case for over 1000 years until the final split between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox national churches of the East. In Timothy's time, there was only one Church. The epistles were always written to the church in _____. In Revelations, Jesus told John to write to the angel of the church in _____. Throughout the New Testament there was one Church. It operated as one body and one organization to the extent possible with the communications technology of the day. The Church of Timothy's day looked to Peter and the Apostles for doctrinal confirmation (even Paul did this in Galatians 2:1-2), sent collections and tithes to support the missionary journeys of the Apostles and needy Christian communities throughout the Church, and accepted only Apostolic authority as authentic (whether direct or delegated by the appointment of a bishop).

Unless They Are Sent

Romans 11:15 asks "how can they preach unless they are sent?" This is the basis for the structure of the New Testament Church. The Apostles were selected by Christ, trained, and then sent with His authority to preach, instruct, and baptize. Likewise, they sent others, such as Titus to Crete, Timothy, Barnabus, and Mark to carry on the great commission of Christ in the full authority that they had been given. Eventually these were succeeded by the next generation – men such as Ignatius of Antioch and Clement of Rome. In the beginning of Acts, the Apostles made their first appointment to fill the vacant office left by Judas' betrayal and death. Later, they selected and appointed the first deacons to help them in their work. As the Church spread out of Judea, the Apostles appointed and "sent" others as bishops and missionaries throughout the Roman world. These men were sent by someone with the authority to do so and continued in the authority of the Apostles in the same way that Elisha received the mantle of Elijah and carried on his ministry and office. Likewise, those appointed by the successors to the Apostles appointed others to carry on this authority. James tells us in his epistle that the sick can call upon the presbyters of the Church to be anointed with oil, healed and forgiven. Even though some modern Protestant translations translate "presbyters" in James 5:14 as "elders" the word is actually the English word "priest".

The Kingdom was not a democracy. Timothy would clearly look for bishops, with full Apostolic authority, as a clue to identifying the Church of the New Testament. And he would look for presbyters and deacons, appointed by and working with their bishops to carry out the mission of the Church.

They Devoted Themselves

Acts 2:42 tells us that the early Church devoted itself to the teaching of the Apostles, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. The early Church met on the first day of the week to celebrate the Lord's Supper – the breaking of bread (Acts 20:7). Jesus said to do this *often* in His memory. Timothy would look for a Church that, like the Church in his day, celebrates Holy Communion as the center of devotion and worship and in a manner that recognizes the Body and Blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:27-30).

Not Even The Gates of Hell

Finally, Timothy would look for a Church that had endured and could make the historical claim of descent from the Apostles. He would be familiar with Christ's promise that not even the gates of Hell could prevail against the Church. Even though he would recognize that individual Church members may have

sinned throughout history and that there may have been scandalous divisions (as Paul warned against in Corinthians), he would look for a Church that had survived and even thrived against enemies within and without, in spite of the sins of its members, in keeping with the promises of Christ.

Will The Real New Testament Church Please Stand Up?

Today, only one Church in the world, the Roman Catholic Church, claims to possess the universal teaching, forgiving, and binding authority of Christ. Protestants deny that any human can forgive sins even though the Scripture is clear that Jesus gave this authority to the Church. Furthermore, the Protestant churches deny binding teaching authority. The Orthodox churches are national rather than universal and also do not claim to teach with the same authority as Christ – binding on all Christians and protected from error by the Holy Spirit.

The Catholic Church carries on the Church structure of the late New Testament times with bishops that trace their authority in an unbroken chain directly from the Apostles and presbyters and deacons appointed to assist them in their apostolic mission.

The Catholic Church, like the early Church, devotes itself to the teachings of the Apostles, fellowship, prayer, and the daily breaking of the bread or the celebration of Holy Communion. From the earliest days of the Church in the 1st and 2nd centuries, Holy Communion has been at the center of worship. While many Protestant churches celebrate Holy Communion infrequently and without discerning the body and blood of Christ, the Catholic Church maintains the practice of the original New Testament Church.

The Catholic Church has endured sinful leadership, laymen, attacks from within and without and remains uncompromising in its stand for traditional Christian morality and doctrines even while a majority of Protestant denominations surrender Christian morality by abandoning their historical stances on abortion, contraception, homosexuality, etc. It is the only Church that can claim universality that has not wavered in its stand. It stands virtually alone in its uncompromising moral stand and yet continues to thrive in the face of this adversity.

Nothing ended with the death of the Apostles - not their teaching, not their authority, and not their mission. The Catholic Church is the only Church that continues in all three of these aspects. Timothy, having come down from heaven, would have no doubt. The real New Testament Church is the Catholic Church. In fact, it is the only one with even a reasonable, historical/doctrinal/moral claim to this lineage. It is the only one that even *claims* to possess full Apostolic authority – the full authority that Jesus exercised and gave to His Apostles. So, either it is the New Testament Church, or that Church no longer exists, or it is hidden and invisible (contrary to Christ's teachings and the actual NT Church).

So What?

But now that we have shown that the Catholic Church is the only contender for the title “Church of the Apostles, Church of the New Testament” – so what? Why does it matter which church you go to since ultimately church is not necessary, as long as you have Jesus? I believe this statement is wrong for three reasons. First, a person cannot claim to follow Jesus and willfully reject His will for unity. Second, this attitude is condemned by analogy in Jude's epistle. And third, by rejecting the Church a Christian rejects the fullness of Christ and the Gospel.

Thy Will Be Done

I will assume that anyone who claims to have Jesus also believes that He should strive to live according to His will. Jesus clearly revealed His will for the Church in His prayer at the Last Supper:

“I pray not only for them [the apostles], but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you,

Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.” John 17:20-23, NAB

Jesus clearly intended for all that believed in Him through the teaching of the apostles to be one with each other and with Him in the same way that Jesus and the Father are one. Jesus clearly stated His reasons for desiring this unity, **(1)** that the Church be brought to perfection as one (in other words, sanctification is not just an individualistic work of God), **(2)** that the world may know that the Father sent Jesus, and **(3)** that the world may know that the Father loves the Church even as the Father loved Jesus. Jesus linked our perfection and the success of His mission to the unity of Christians. We cannot have unity when we willingly reject His Church. By doing so, we are willingly rejecting His stated will, our own perfection, and the success of His mission.

In addition, in this passage Jesus described the mechanism for this unity as the glory that He passed on to the Apostles from the Father. He earlier related this glory to the **authority** to bring eternal life to all (see John 17:1-2). Later, after His resurrection, Jesus commissioned the Apostles to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and instructing them to do all that He had commanded (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus elsewhere stated that to see Him is to see the Father and to know Him is to know the Father. To see the Church is to see Christ on earth. To know the Church is to know Christ on earth. To be in the Church is to be in Christ on earth. And to reject the Church is to reject Christ on earth.

The Sin of Korah

Jude warned Christians against the sin of Korah (Jude 11). This sin was a rejection of the authority of Moses and thus a rejection of the God whom Moses was representing (Numbers 16). It did not have a happy ending for the sons of Korah. In fact, one of the major claims of Korah was that all of Israel was a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (based on Ex. 19:6) so who did Moses think he was anyway? Protestants imply this same charge, that because all Christians are kings and priests, there should be no one with authority over them.

Just because the people of God are a royal priesthood and a holy nation does not mean that they have equal authority. It is the Kingdom of God, not the Republic of God. The New Testament repeatedly tells us to obey the leaders **appointed** over us and that not all will be equally rewarded in the Kingdom. Many of Jesus’ parables point to this fact as does His acknowledgement that the Apostles would sit in judgment over the tribes of Israel. To reject legitimate authority (even by indifference), appointed by God, in favor of our own authority, is to re-commit the sin of Korah.

What Is The Value Of Circumcision? (Romans 3:1)

Many early Christians questioned the value of the Old Covenant in the face of the New Covenant. Paul rejected this questioning by pointing out that the Jews had had the advantage of the full knowledge of God’s revelation in their day. This is the primary advantage of the Catholic Church – the full deposit of faith and revelation of God coupled with the promise of the Holy Spirit’s protective guidance and the grace provided in support of Apostolic authority and mission. This fullness of Christ’s Gospel can lead to a certainty and freedom elsewhere unavailable.

Christians can know the Truth through its pillar and foundation – the Church. This Truth then sets them free. This freedom cannot be realized so long as we cannot know for certain that the doctrines we believe are without error. And we can never know this outside the Catholic Church. This freedom is not gained without much study, prayer, and submission to both the Holy Spirit and the teaching authority of the

Church that speaks for Jesus Christ. This teaching authority means that, especially on teachings essential to salvation (faith and morals), one is assured of what the truth is. Submission means following that truth to Christ. That is the hard part.

Jimmy Swaggert once said that when we all get to heaven, we will find out we were wrong about something. True enough, but we will only be wrong where our beliefs and actions conflict with the binding teachings of the Church. The true tragedy of this is that we could have known about our errors by studying those teachings now and conforming to them.

While the “stick” of Church membership is the sin of rejecting Christ’s will and the sin of Korah (rejecting God by rejecting those He placed into authority), the “carrot” is the freedom of knowing that conformance and obedience to Christ’s Church prevents error and especially prevents us from having to reinvent the doctrinal wheel with every generation.

Conclusion – The Church as Bride

I grew up in denominations reading “Christian comics” that portrayed the Catholic Church as blasphemous and the Pope as a leading candidate for the anti-Christ. Not only do these groups believe that it is unnecessary to be a part of the Catholic Church, they believe that it is wrong. But the Catholic Church is the same Church, historically, doctrinally, morally, and authoritatively, as the Church of the New Testament. It *is* the Bride of Christ. How can one reject the Bride and expect to be accepted at the wedding?

The real question is not, “why do I need to join the Catholic Church if I have Jesus?” but, “***if one claims to have Christ, by what right does one refuse to submit to the authority of His Church?***” By what right can someone create his own church and yet claim that he is following Christ? By what right can someone follow any church with a clearly defined starting date later than Christ’s Ascension and the day of Pentecost? The burden of proof is on the person who says that he follows Christ but can still reject His Bride.

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Mark D. Steele was received into the Catholic Church 2 years ago at Easter from a background of fundamentalism and Pentecostalism with a detour through apostasy. He lives outside Philadelphia with his wife and three children.