

Chapter IV

THE CHURCH OF TODAY

Preview

These pages examine the church under three categorizations, the church of today, the church of Paul, and the church of Jesus. These examinations will, in each case, focus on certain salient features as follows:

- 1. Size
- 2. Divisions
- 3. Doctrine
- 4. Administration
- 5. Adjudication
- 6. Recruiting
- 7. Worship and ritual
- 8. Relation to the world
- 9. Life

We will focus briefly on each area under each of the three categorizations. We will select a key word in each case, then, we will collect and compare our observations and draw conclusions. This final book of this volume does not pretend to do an exhaustive study. Instead, we only deal with what is obvious and incontrovertible, at least to the eye of a long time observer who was once part of the church but is so no longer. This type of study is sufficient to provide a basis for understanding the church in its essence and of its relation to Jesus. We will find some interesting comparisons of these salient features.

The method is important in that we do not seek an exhaustive study such as one would expect from an accomplished scholar. My intention is to show that the prominent features of today's church are so obviously different from the standards laid down by the Lord that even a child can detect and evaluate them. That leaves all without excuse.

Also, the reader should be aware that the church as understood here is an umbrella term that defines the worldwide institution that exists to promote the Christian religion. It is composed of all of the "Christians" in the world who, individually, "belong" to the church. It is a singular institution, hence has no plural when defined in this way. It is, however, composed of the many denominations and individual congregations that have arisen.

1. Size

The church is huge! Here at the turn of the century, when the world population is about 6.2 billion,

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there are about two billion Christians, or almost one of every three people on the face of the earth, who are members of "the church." Of these, about half, or one billion, are Catholics and one half billion are Protestants. The latter include primarily Lutherans (or Evangelicals), Calvinists (or Reformed), Anabaptists, and Anglicans. Additionally, there are about two hundred million (.2 billion) Orthodox Christians worldwide. Other, lesser sects (.3 billion) add up to the total of two billion Christians in the church worldwide. This means that Christianity has more adherents, more members in its congregations, than any other religion! This is true even though there are some European countries where Christianity is considered to be in decline and where the expression "post Christian" is often used to describe the religious environment.

Southern Baptists constitute the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. Baptists in the United States all together belong to more than twenty different denominations and number about 40 million, or about 40 percent of the Protestant population.

These large numbers are yet too small to suite the churchmen, and "winning the world for Christ in our generation" is one of the most frequently heard church slogans in our time. One gets the idea that they expect every single human being on the face of the earth to eventually become a Christian and a member of the church.

To this end the more evangelistic Protestants are constantly pushing to increase the size of their congregations, and the success or failure of pastors and evangelists depends on the number of their converts. Any pastor, priest, or bishop who presides over a declining congregation will not have a great future in the ministry unless there are clear and obvious reasons for the decline, which no one could overcome. In short, success in the ministry depends on the numbers more than on any other single factor. The pastor of the huge congregations such as Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, TN. must see a growing church if he is not to be replaced.

Some of the larger denominations of the church, primarily the Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran and Calvinistic denominations in Europe have sought to insure growth through becoming state churches and enforcing universal church membership by baptizing all persons born in their state or nation. Indeed, this has been the rule for a large portion of the history of Christianity, beginning with the incorporation of the church into state affairs by the Roman Emperor, Constantine, in the early Fourth Century.

Yes, the church of today is huge, and seems destined to become even larger as its missions pursue converts in such relatively untouched and heavily populated nations as China, India, Pakistan, and the Muslim Middle East states. One of the primary reasons for the vast expansion of the church is, of course, its cheap admission fee. All that many Protestant denominations require of one is to confess sins, repent, believe in the gospel as preached by the particular denomination, then confess belief in Christ and submit to baptism. This is the long list! The short one is cheaper yet: believe in Christ as your savior and confess your sins. This, of course, is the Baptist formula for salvation. If you want to join the church and obtain voting rights in the congregation, you must also be baptized.

Admission is cheaper yet in Catholicism. If one is born into a Catholic family, one has no choice but is baptized as an infant into the church. Confirmation is required of youths, but this is assured for every youth wanting to join, after which it becomes almost impossible to get out!

The single key word that best defines the size of the Church of today is: huge! This word not only defines its actual size, but also its attitude to size.

2. Divisions of the Church of Today

It is possible to speak of the worldwide church in the singular only because all Christians, whatever their denomination, tend to have four things in common: (1) monotheism; (2) the belief that Jesus as founder and savior of the church; (3) the Bible as Holy Scripture, and (4) the name "Christian". These are very significant unifying factors, yet, institutionally speaking, they have almost no effect because the sad fact is that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of different Christian denominations and sects, each of which, with rare exceptions, judges itself to be the one true church. We have already suggested this fact by listing the division of the numbers of Christians among their denominations above. There are more than twenty-two major denominations of Baptists alone! The exceptions, groups that do not judge their denomination to be the one true church, are the "liberal" denominations that include, to give examples, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Unitarian-Universalist Church.

The one billion Catholics in the world constitute by far the largest single denomination, and one of the oldest. It is only natural, then, that they generally hold the conviction that theirs is the one true church. All others are apostates! I do not mean that all Catholics believe this, for there are growing number of liberal Catholics who will fellowship with Christians of other denominations. Nevertheless, when pressed, the church hierarchy stands fast to the conviction that theirs is the one true church. The same can be said of the Eastern Orthodox denominations. Theirs are also ancient institutions and they claim to be the only church in true apostolic succession.

When we turn to Protestantism, the picture is of even greater fragmentation. Furthermore, many of the Protestants are just as convinced as the Catholics or the Orthodox Christians that theirs is the one true church. They cannot, of course, demonstrate a direct and unbroken chain of apostolic succession but they will claim it anyway, usually pleading that their predecessors in the chain were too few to make history, or that their baptism is in direct succession from the apostles. I have heard many an old time Baptist claim his denomination for the one true church, going all the way back to John the Baptist! The Campbellites, or members of the "Church of Christ" so called, likewise lay claim to being the one true church. After all, they will say, we are not called "the Church of Christ" for nothing!

The situation in the United States is unique due to its constitutional state-church separation and consequent freedom of religion. This results in a more liberal atmosphere because no denomination has to fear dominance or persecution by another. The differences are therefore less militantly maintained. Each can be more accepting and acceptable to the others without fear of being attacked. This results, ironically, in even more divisions because every persuasive preacher with a message has the freedom to gather a following and create his own denomination. It happens every day! For the most part, the old line Protestants, having nothing to fear from one another and having daily intercourse with one another on social, occupational and political grounds have become very accepting of their differences. They will even boast of them. For example, the Chamber of Commerce of a small municipality will seek to promote the city by appeals to the "many fine churches of great variety" to be found there. The ministers of the various denominational congregations will take turns serving as chaplain of the civic organizations, whose members come from the full spectrum of their local denominations. Frequently, bonds of friendship form across denominational lines and are much stronger than the denominational differences. Nevertheless, they are still divided when it comes to religion. They are of distinctly different religious families and this they acknowledge by carefully maintaining their denominational distinctions and names.

The divisions among Christians arise from many independent factors. Here we list only a few of the more obvious ones. They are:

- 1. Doctrine

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- 2. Race
- 3. Nationality
- 4. Economics
- 5. Education
- 6. Egotism
- 7. Politics
- 8. Worship

The doctrinal divisions have generally arisen when different individuals come to interpret the Bible differently. Usually egotism, together with political factors, also makes contributions. Race comes to the fore in nations such as the United States, where blacks and whites live in close proximity. National divisions are seen when we survey the church on an international scale and see the many distinct denominations that are tied to particular nations. This division becomes most notable when Christian nations make war against each other. The poor tend to divide from the wealthy Christians, motivated both by economic and educational factors. An ego driven and charismatic leader is often the spark that a new denomination needs to set it going as large numbers of Christians gather around him or her and distinguish themselves from others. Differing worship experiences have resulted, in the Twentieth Century, in the founding of a whole multitude of new Pentecostal denominations. Usually the other divisive factors also make contributions.

These are the major causes of divisions; there are other lesser ones and doubtless new causes of strife will arise to spark yet more denominations as the centuries pass. Of all this we can with full justification make one comment that seems incontrovertible: Whatever divides the Christians is valued more highly than whatever would unify them. Every split is a failure of love; every split is a failure in the common devotion to Jesus and his word.

In fairness we must also comment on the Ecumenical Movement that was effective in the Twentieth Century to heal many old wounds and promote unity within Protestantism. Many earnest Christians strove to overcome old quarrels and unify the church by the creation of bodies that could transcend denominational differences, such as the World Council of Churches. Unhappily, their results fell far short of their goals. Indeed, there are new divisions because of them, as some Christians split from their denominations to form others due, at least partly, to their opposition to joining with others. There are fewer independent denominations of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians than before, but they are yet Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians!

There yet remains so many divisions, and different kinds of divisions, separating the different denominations that I can think of only one word fittingly called the key word: myriad.

3. Doctrine

We are not concerned here with the fact that doctrine is a major cause of divisions in the church, as just listed above. Nor are we concerned with the details of the different doctrines. Rather, we ask, What are the roots of doctrine in the church?

It is an easy question to answer, but the answer differs from one denomination to another. In Catholicism, doctrine issues from historic creeds, church councils, and the accumulation of Papal decrees through the centuries. For them, the church itself becomes the sole arbiter of correct

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doctrine. Orthodox doctrine claims similar sources. In Protestantism, it is usually the Bible that is the repository of doctrine, especially the New Testament epistles of Paul. From this the various denominations draw their confessions and statements of faith, with lesser if any dependence on the creeds. Among fundamental Christians, the Bible is taken to be the literal inspired Word of God, without error or contradiction. They then feel fully justified in quoting only the Bible as the source of their doctrines. The most liberal denominations, Unitarian-Universalists, for example, accord to the individual educated mind the ability to determine true doctrine. They allow for wide differences of opinion without a rupture of fellowship. At the bottom line, however, there seems to be only one doctrine in common to them, and that is the belief in the freedom to disbelieve!

Their many distinctive doctrines is one of their primary features. A good key word is therefore, diverse, as the doctrines themselves differ, and they derive from a variety of sources.

4. Administration (Authority)

There are wide varieties of administration among the different branches of the church. Here we do not get into the details but only comment on the ultimate authority and the manner in which the authority is disbursed. In most cases, Protestant as well as Catholic and Orthodox, authority to administer resides in a titular head – a bishop, Pope, Patriarch, or other executive through whom all authority flows from God to the church. The administrative structure is hierarchical in which a priest, pastor, or superintendent occupies the bottom level, immediately over a local congregation. Some have a "congregational polity" in which it is the congregation, meeting and voting democratically, that is the final authority to decide on significant issues. Pastors and others, usually called elders, presbyters or deacons, are given limited authority to act as guardians of the faith and practice, but are subject to removal by the congregation if they exercise their authority contrary to the wishes of the majority.

Christians consider God to be the ultimate source of authority in all cases. Where the denomination is hierarchical, authority issues from God through the Christ and the Spirit to the Patriarch, Pope, or bishop and flows through the hierarchy to the lowest level, which is the congregation. Where the polity is congregational, authority issues from God through Christ and the Spirit to the individuals in the congregation who then arrive at a consensus so as to maintain unity. Their priesthood is that of the believer in the church. When consensus fails, the congregation usually divides. They will sometimes then take their dispute to civil courts in efforts, not to decide who is theologically correct, but to determine who will retain the property of the congregation.

Even those denominations that boast of their congregational polity nevertheless give authority in some degree to the pastor and a local church board – deacons, elders, and the like. To the degree that they do this, they also have a hierarchical administration. The flow of authority then, in their minds, issues from God through the Christ to the pastor and board and finally to the church.

The two basic types of authority structures seem to take their form from the differing forms of civil government that have ruled the world in different times and places. The hierarchical denomination finds its original pattern in the Imperial government of the Roman Empire that ruled during the earliest centuries of church development. The congregational polity of course takes its cues from the rise of democratic governments in the western world during the past three centuries. Both types are highly compatible with their original environments, as the members of the church are also the citizens of the nation in which they reside.

We could therefore assign two key words to describe both types of administration: autocratic and democratic. Since we seek a single word, I will select varied.

5. Adjudication

Who is to settle a dispute? Everyone agrees that disputes should be adjudicated first by the individuals where the dispute resides. When two individuals disagree, it is only common sense to bring them together to iron out their differences. But frequently others become involved, and the dispute expands to include the whole congregation or perhaps becomes a dispute between congregations. What then?

It is natural that the resolution of disputes should proceed upwards in the same channels through which authority flows downwards, to be settled at the lowest possible level. This holds true in almost any denomination without regard to the type of administration. In a hierarchy, the appeal is first to the priest, then on to the bishop, the archbishop, and ultimately to the Pope or Patriarch. Under congregational polity, the appeal is often directly to the pastor or to the elders, deacons, etc., acting not as judges but as counselors. If no resolution is possible there, it goes to the congregation or to some committee thereof selected for the purpose. When no resolution is possible, a rupture of fellowship may result, in which one party to the dispute leaves or is expelled from the congregation. In some cases the congregation divides.

Without regard to denomination, when the dispute between individuals of a congregation does not directly involve matters of religion, property disputes for example, in almost every case the dispute will be taken directly to the civil courts. Who thinks of going to the pastor or priest to settle a dispute concerning how an inheritance is to be divided? Or to establish fault in an automobile accident?

It is difficult to assign one key word to all these different methods of adjudication, so I shall simply say, varied.

6. Recruiting

Here the focus is upon method. How does the congregation reach out to recruit or convert new members from a population of undecided individuals? "Undecided individuals" usually constitute a democratic society where there is freedom of religion, where every denomination has to acquire new recruits in the same way – through preaching and personal appeals to make converts! But this applies only where every individual has the right to decide for any denomination, or for none. Where an established state-church exists and the civil government issues from the same superiors as the church administration, the situation is vastly different. Here, the denomination simply claims every citizen from birth, and that is that! Large families are often encouraged by the officials and are usually the norm. And, historically, when an adjoining territory seems available by whatever means, including military, conquest is justified and all the conquered are forcibly converted for the sake of their eternal souls.

In all cases, the denomination recruits or retains members through a simple technique: Promise the ultimate enticement – eternal life – then, establish a very cheap price of admission and the maximum penalty for defection – expulsion from the congregation and loss of eternal life or, in some cases, temporal life.

Established denominations that move out of their home domains to promote missions and establish congregations in democratic states that enjoy freedom of religion, such as the Lutherans or Catholics in the United States, must inevitably engage in hypocrisy. They are always suspect, because there is nothing in their roots to keep them from seeking religious hegemony, and everything to move them to seek exactly that. Established church status must inevitably be their goal and religious freedom their nemesis, with which they co-operate only by the

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compromise of their principles, and only because of the ultimate hope of both political and religious triumph. Religious freedom, including the freedom to speak, to evangelize and to assemble for religious purposes, is truly a precious possession!

I do not mean that every individual Catholic or Lutheran seeks the death of religious freedom. Democratic influences in the democratic state are far too strong to so easily be defeated, even by an autocratic hierarchy. What I mean is that autocracy is the ultimate goal of the hierarchy, and when it can be achieved by any means it will be so achieved and the individual members of the denomination will not have the democratic roots to persist in opposition to their leaders. Apart from a very few apostate holdouts, they will only rejoice in their victory.

We see then that the methods of recruiting differ from one nation to another, and from one denomination to another, and from one period in history to another. They include primarily preaching, forced conversion, and natural birth. For a key word I must again select varied.

7. Worship and Ritual

A building serves as the focus of religious activity throughout Christendom. Almost every community has at least one "church" prominently and centrally located. These buildings serve both as educational and worship facilities. It is there that the members go to worship God together and celebrate their faith in various ritualistic ways. Here it is our purpose simply to list the common elements in that worship. These are:

- 1. Sacred music, including congregational, choral, and solo hymn singing.
- 2. Public, common prayer, including the Lord's Prayer
- 3. Eucharist or Lord's Supper
- 4. Collection of tithes and offerings
- 5. The sermon
- 6. The minister, often cloaked in "ministerial attire", specifically, a long robe.

These common elements that appear, with few exceptions, in the worship of every denomination, have differences in detail in almost every case. Their roots extend far back into history, to the Roman Empire, ancient Judaism, and pagan religion. Most denominational representatives will claim either the Bible or ancient church practice as the origin of their worship arrangements, but almost all are blind to the strong pagan and Jewish influences behind both sources.

Searching for a key word to describe the modern worship in Christian churches, the word "structured" come quickly to mind. We could also say with justification that the worship is varied, which is our selection so as to conform to the key word for the previous feature.

8. Relation to the world

I define the world here as the collection of all human beings outside the congregation, together with their institutions. The institutions of the world include, of course, many private organizations gathered for a multitude of different purposes, from education and medical care to sports, industry, and civic activity. There is one single institution that seems to transcend them all, which is the nation with its many subdivisions, including the constituent states and local government agencies. The various military branches also constitute different components of the nation and therefore of the world. They exist primarily for the national defense, but sometimes for the pure

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purpose of conquest and/or oppression. In nations where an "established church" exists, this institution constitutes a separate department of the government, and state levied taxes may be utilized to supply the church budget.

Political parties exist within each nation to promote specific national interests and provide means of selecting governmental staff persons through either appointment or elections. The Parties in a democracy provide a base for the promotion of sectarian causes within the government, and there is usually a multi-party system as in the United States. Of course, the members of the church of today, being also citizens professing patriotic duties, will generally also be members of the political parties.

Every nation lays claim to every person born within its geographic confines. Each individual is called a citizen and the nation commands loyalty and allegiance from every citizen. This includes, of course, all people associated with the church. The nation also claims the right to conscript its citizens to serve in the military forces in times of national emergency. There are other specific duties and responsibilities that every citizen is expected, sometimes compelled, to perform. Among these are voting, jury service and the swearing or pledging of oaths of allegiance. Aliens, however, are generally not expected to participate in these things.

There is also a national anthem that the citizens sing together in recognition of their devotion to the nation. There will also be, in any nation, a flag that symbolizes the entire nation and commands due respect from the citizens, just as they respect the nation. Singing the anthem, pledging allegiance, saluting the flag and displaying it respectfully are among the "patriotic duties" that citizens gladly perform.

The church of today relates to all this in a very positive way. The Christians who make up the various congregations are also, first of all, citizens of the nation. The church serves often to remind them of their civic and patriotic duties, even in a democracy where there is no administrative connection to the government. Therefore, most fundamentally, the same people who comprise the churches also comprise the nation.

We can expect as a result what is indeed the fact, that the modern church is one of the most supportive institutions of the nation. The national flag may be displayed before the congregation at worship, together with the Christian flag; the Sunday School will teach the Pledge of Allegiance, and the minister and teachers will promote patriotism along with the faith. The nation also supports the church in various ways, such as minting coins and printing bank notes that display the motto, "In God we trust," and in compelling oaths in courts of law, on the Bible and in the name of God. Politicians who hold high office find it expedient to join one of the many religious congregations in the land since this gives them a certain aura of godliness that helps win elections in a democracy, or to retain the loyalty of their subjects in a monarchy. Many laws are passed and enforced as needed to preserve the freedom of religion and the free exercise thereof in the church. There is therefore a mutually beneficial relationship between the two institutions that are, at root, different branches of the same tree, "the people." It is the people who together form a common pool from which both the nation and the church draw individuals as needed to perform their separate functions.

As we search for a key word to describe this relationship of the two institutions, the church and the world, we cannot find a better one than bound. The Church is bound to the world at the chest (or at the heart), and is not likely ever to be separated by any means.

9. Life

The attitude to life of the members of the modern church is precisely the same as the attitude to life of the citizens of the nation. This is true of necessity since it is mostly the same people who are involved in both. Proceeding from the ubiquitous "love of life" that pervades and energizes

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both institutions, we see why the church of today is often closely allied with the nation and the state in which it exists. The evidence of this alliance begins, in the United States, with the original Declaration of Independence that was written by Thomas Jefferson and published July 4, 1776. This is the Independence Day that the church in America celebrates as enthusiastically as any civic body in the land. It includes this statement:

We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

The first mentioned right, the Right to Life, is therefore the first concern of the nation in its inception, and it remains so today as the citizens continue to memorize and quote these prized words from the Declaration. We cannot distinguish the men and women of the modern church from this first concern, since they prize these lines and continue to memorize and quote them throughout their lives, often in their congregations and religious schools. Precisely as the love of life is fundamental to the nation and all its concerns, so it is fundamental to the modern church in all its concerns.

The Declaration of Independence also seals this marriage of the nation with the modern church by its references to God. First, he is Creator. Then it closes with an appeal to the Supreme Judge of the world and a statement of "firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence." This established a firm union, in the public mind, between the dual interests of God and country that both supports and is supported by the modern church to this day, with no slackening of devotion. They are, we must justly say, the same side of the two coins!

There is nothing that demonstrates this union of the modern church and the world, that is, the nation, more vividly than the promotion by the church of The Boy Scouts of America. Although the Scouting Movement is independent of both the church and the state, it performs the most unique indoctrination function by establishing the unity of the two and their common interests in each young generation of boys. An official statement on the Boy Scout web site, scouting.org, reads as follows:

The Boy Scouts of America was incorporated to provide a program of community organizations that offers effective character, citizenship, and personal fitness training for youth.

Specifically, the BSA endeavors to develop American citizens who are physically, mentally, and emotionally fit; have a high degree of self-reliance as evidenced in such qualities as initiative, courage, and resourcefulness; have personal values based on religious concepts; have the desire and skills to help others; understand the principles of American social, economic, and governmental systems; are knowledgeable about and take pride in their American heritage and understand our nation's role in the world; have a keen respect for the basic rights of all people; and are prepared to participate in and give leadership to American society.

We note the prime objective in developing American citizens . . . who have personal values based on religious concepts . . .

Then, the scout must learn and subscribe to the Scout Law, the last of which is:

A Scout is reverent toward God. He is faithful in his religious duties. He respects the beliefs of others.

Then, of course, there is the Scout Oath, as follows:

On my honor I will do my best

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To do my duty to God and my country
and to obey the Scout Law;
To help other people at all times;
To keep myself physically strong,
mentally awake, and morally straight.

The Boy Scouts of America have an admirable focus on education and character development of American youth. But it seems that a major focus is the creation and maintenance of a mental disposition that melds church and state, or God and country.

Then, the Public School enters in with the very same message and seals the indoctrination! Any young person, having been exposed to the influences of the nation, the church, and the Boy Scouts of America (or Girl Scouts of America) during the most formative years can only be so thoroughly indoctrinated in this meld that there is little chance he or she will ever seek a different view.

Now, if we ask, "What do these institutions, the state and the church of today, hold in common that blends them and their interests so universally?" we must recognize only one correct answer: the love of life. Therefore, for so long as both institutions exist in a democratic society, they will be happily married.

They are indeed more closely bound than in a mere marriage. Their union is more akin to that of Siamese twins. They are not just joined at the hip, or even the head, but are inseparably joined at the chest, that is, at the heart due to the love of life that rules there.

Seeking a key word to define the attitude of the Church of the modern world to life in this world, I have no choice but to mark it down as positive.