

MEGAMYSTERY

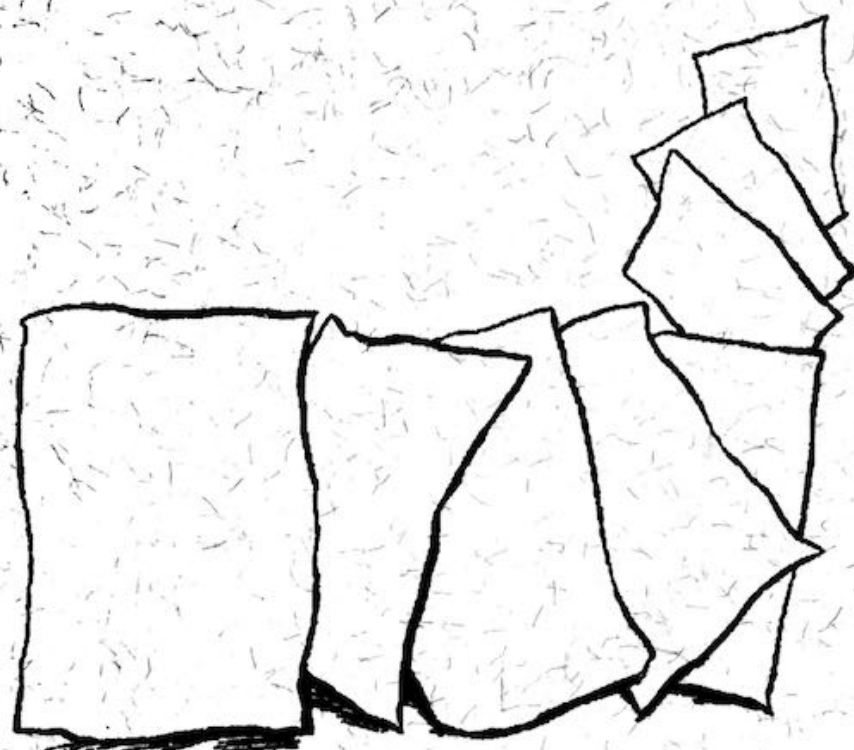
The Called Out of God

by
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WITH

A Spiritual Church

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December 2003

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CHAPTER I

The Church, The Elect of God

"For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church". (Ephesians 5:29-32)

The New Testament is replete with mysteries; especially the book of Ephesians, which is intensely Paul's epistle of mystical Christian realities, but the Greek adjective *meegas*, is used in respect to a mystery only twice in the Bible. The only other time it appears is in I Timothy 3:14-16, "*And without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness*". In both of these appearances, the megamystery contemplates "*the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*" (I Tim. 3:15).

Ignorance and error about this great and glorious mystery is at the root of all sorts of weaknesses, abuse and false doctrine in Christian churches of virtually every stripe in existence. This first chapter will be chiefly concerned with the identity of what we call "the church". There is mega-confusion here.

Two Confusing Words

The Greek word rendered "church" in the English Bible is *ekklesia*. It is a composite of two other words, a preposition *ek* (out) and a derivative of the verb *kaleo* (to call). Hence the word has reference to "the called out". Although churches are popularly referred to as "assemblies", and *ekklesia* is thrice translated "assembly" (in reference to a civic gathering) in the English Bible, the idea of assembly is not even implicit in *ekklesia*. More will be said about this later. *Ekklesia* can only apply to a particular marked out **people**. It cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be rightly applied to a building, an organization, an institution or an establishment.

The English word "church" is derived from a translation of the Greek *kuriakon*, (house of the Lord) which always has reference to a pagan temple of idols. The word is nowhere in the Bible used in reference to God's people, the Christian church. The rendering of *ekklesia* as "church", therefore, is not an honest translation, but an erroneously contrived interpretation. Doubtlessly this was based on a flawed ecclesiology. Exactly who to blame, and why, is anyone's guess. It is likely the Reformers, wishing to nullify the Roman Catholic claim to the one universal church thought to do so by turning people's attention to an individual local church by identifying it with the building in which the people met. Whatever the cause, the curse of this error rests heavily upon us today. The failure of the word "church" to adequately represent what the *ekklesia* really is permits legitimacy to be claimed by everything from any frivolous play-church organization to the great whore. At the same time, the true called-out of the Lord remain largely unrecognized or ignored. A great mystery indeed!

This word confusion is further aggravated by the usage of the word "church". It is used of a denomination in distinction from all other denominations of Christianity. It is used of a building where people meet for religious purposes. It is used of all Christians in a state or nation. It is used in the name of a particular association of professing Christians who regularly assemble in a certain locality. Then it is also used of all the elect and redeemed people of God. The last two are the only biblical usages of the word *ekklesia* in respect to professing Christianity. Of these two, only one can fully represent the essential meaning of the word, the other being a secondary usage. It is vitally important that the *ekklesia* upon which our eyes are focused and which we have in our minds is

the one Jesus spoke of in Matthew 16:18, "*upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" If the idea we have of "the church" does not meet the criteria for that one, we have no interest in it whatsoever. It is merely another human organization, is nothing, and will come to nothing.

Only One People of God

When Jesus announced the building of His church, He was, on the one hand, speaking of something new, but on the other hand he was only stating an ancient reality in new terms. Since the creation God has never been without a people to bear His Name, reflect His image, and prophesy His word. And He has never had more than one people at a time to do that. That one people have always been indivisible. They have gone under many various names, each one describing a particular property or characteristic or nature of such people, but in every case the same one people. The oneness of God's people was expounded in particular in a previous *Gatepost* article entitled "*God's People Are One*". (A free copy will be sent upon request.) For the present purposes we will simply call attention to oneness in Creation, oneness in the Fall, and oneness in election and redemption. Oneness in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Rom. 2:28-29, Phil. 3:3, Gal. 3:29). Oneness in Christ (Eph. 2:13-15). There is a difference in God's Old Covenant people, who were merely an outward people and not necessarily regenerate, and God's New Covenant people who are an inward people (people of the heart), and who are all regenerate. But even among the Old Covenant outward people there were those of the inward spiritual character of the New Covenant. These are all of that great company of eternally elect people who constitute the one people, the one *ekklesia* of the Living God of all ages (Matt. 8:11-12).

There are those who contrive distinctions between many concurrent peoples of God. According to these theories, the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, redeemed ethnic Israel, and the church, are all entirely different entities which all have entirely different eschatological destinies. Even the redeemed will be divided in glory, some on earth, some inside the holy city, some outside, some included in the Bride, others merely guests. All of these various "peoples of God" permit vital criteria of the one true church to be stripped from her and bestowed upon these other entities, leaving the *ekklesia* of God to be whatever is necessary to fit man's own arrogated purposes.

I wish to assert at the outset that irrespective of the many names and figures and states in which we find the people of God in the scriptures, if they are indeed God's evangelically elect people, those people are the true *ecclesia*, the church of the living God. By "evangelically elect" I mean their standing before God has always been according to the gospel. Abraham and "Abraham's seed" must be included, since he was justified by faith. Lot, who is declared "just" and a righteous soul, must also be included in those saved by the merits of Jesus Christ, called out to His *ekklesia*. All Israel who are such inwardly, who are "circumcised in heart" (Rom. 2:28-29) must be counted a part of the *ekklesia* of God. Such inward circumcision can only come by divine regeneration, the birth from above wrought by the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven by the Lord Jesus. Can the true church be described in any more concise yet comprehensive terms than in Phillipians 3:3? That spiritual Israel under the Old Covenant is one with the New Covenant church is irrefutably established in that the New Covenant was made, not with an entirely different people, but with "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31-34). We have this *ekklesia* of Christ, prefigured, prophesied and described in the Old Testament as Mount Zion, Jerusalem, the Temple (where God dwells, from which proceeds God's prophetic word, where offerings are made and received, prayers are made, heard, and answered. Christ in His church is Daniel's Rock hewn out of the mountain (Dan. 2) which grinds all the governments of men to powder and becomes a mountain filling the whole earth. It is the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, the light of the world, a city set on a hill, the pillar and ground of truth. It is the bride of Christ, His body in distinction from Himself as Head. It is the temple of God, a "habitation of God by the Spirit". It is a holy nation made up of kings and priests unto God. It is the "whole family of God in heaven and earth". John saw the church in the New Jerusalem descending down from heaven (Rev. 21:1-3). We who come to Christ do not come to Mt. Sinai, but to "*Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel*". (Heb. 12:22-24).

The Church That Christ Builds

In the interest of simplicity in the remainder of this chapter I will use the word "church" to designate the *ekklesia* of Christ. There are absolute criteria that church must meet, otherwise it is not the church of the living God. Here they are:

1). It is inseparably identified with Christ. The megamystery in I Timothy 3:16 is prefaced by Paul's introduction of the subject of "*the church of the Living God, the pillar and ground of truth*". This is immediately followed by a declaration of the saga of the Divine incarnation, preaching, and glorification of Christ. The church is the single cause of the incarnation. Christ came down to redeem for Himself a Bride. The megamystery of Ephesians 5:32 illustrates the bonding of man and woman by the inseparability of the one body of Christ and His church. Every member of this church is a member of Christ and of every other member of Christ (Eph. 5:30, 4:25). There are no hypocrites or false professors in it. There are no unconverted "covenant children" in it. Each individual member, together with this whole church, has real organic mystical union with Christ. We are each and every one "members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones" (Eph. 5:30). This is graphically illustrated in Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:21-24). We really do participate in His Life (Gal. 2:20). Christianity is not imitating Christ but partaking of Him (I Cor. 10:17, Heb. 3:14).

2). Christ is really the Head of this church. It has real infallible government and leadership. (Rom. 8:14, John 14:18-23). All humanly contrived church governments are fallible, whether they be episcopal, presbyterian, or congregational. They all claim Christ's headship but obviously do not have it, for they all make terrible blunders, abuses and ungodly actions. Christ does not rule and guide as an organic Head in either the denominational or the local church. Men do. Neither of these could possibly be what Jesus spoke of in Matthew 16.

3). This church is constituted by all the elect of God, all of those for whom Christ died, all that shall finally be saved. Every single saint belongs to this church. It is this church, these particular souls whom the Father gave to the son (John

6:37-39). All of them will surely come to Christ, for He effectually *calls them out to Himself* (John 6:44). They are the *ekklesia*, and all who come to Christ will surely be received.

4). It is this church, and only this church, that has true and real spiritual unity. They all believe the same thing so far as essential truth and spiritual life. Select a score of them utterly isolated geographically, culturally, tribally, and ethically. Then examine them concerning their faith. It will be found that they are in exact agreement concerning the One true God, the Savior, repentance, faith, spiritual life, righteousness, godliness, the word of God, the resurrection, judgment and eternal life. Paul's request that the Corinthian church be perfectly joined in the same mind and same judgment is perfectly reasonable. It could not be otherwise in the church that Christ builds since they are all taught by Him (John 6:45, Eph. 4:21), indwelt by the same Spirit, and partakers of the same mystical body. One body absolutely mandates one Lord (Head), one faith and one baptism. Without this real spiritual unity the intercessory prayer of our Lord is made vain (John 17:20-23), and we may have no confidence in the efficiency of His present intercession. Our hope is vain. We are still in our sins! Needless to say, this unity is not, nor will ever be found to live and survive in a denominational church or among local churches. In fact it is one of the primary activities of denominations to promote **disunity** with other Christians by preaching their creeds and confessions rather than the word of God.

5). All members of this church have true holiness. They are not sinners. They are saints. Every one of them! They were sanctified by the Holy Spirit when He called them by regeneration of the Spirit and the word of God. (Jn. 17:17; Eph. 5:26; I Cor. 6:11). Separation is a condition without which none will be received as God's children (II Cor. 6:17-18), and without this holiness none shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Such one hundred percent holiness is not found either in the denominational or the local church.

6). It is this church, and this church only which is the "salt of the earth", the "light of the world", the "city set on a hill", the "pillar and ground of truth". It is the one upon which

the Holy Spirit falls and makes men "witnesses of Christ", and by whose love all men recognize the disciples of Christ. The world encounters the institutional church and is utterly unimpressed. It sees in it the same politics, divisions, fleshy, petty, jealousies, envies, strife, hatred, greed, pride, unbelief, and foolishness that is found in every other organization of this world. Organizations and institutions make no impact on souls. Only God in a bonafide Christian can do that. Let a sinner meet the church of the Living God in one God-filled Christian and he will never again be able to convince himself that God did not redemptively visit this earth in the person of Jesus Christ. He may never be converted; he may hate and persecute the church, but he can never dismiss it from his mind. It is this church, and this church alone that does "greater works than Christ did" through the power of the diffused Spirit.

7). This church, and this church alone, is invincible, indestructible, incorruptible, and absolutely secure, both in each and every member and in its entirety. Not one of its numbers shall ever fall away, apostatize and perish. All other churches will very soon apostatize, dwindle away to nothing, close their doors, sell out and disappear. In twenty centuries of our Lord's reign and Headship, everything that has been polluted by man's tools has perished, while the one church that He built abides. Every local church and every denomination has found its way into the same ecclesiastical dunghill. None of these can be the church that Christ built.

The members of this church have been, and yet are, persecuted, oppressed, tortured, beaten, murdered, hounded out of society, driven to the wilderness and the caves in the earth. It has often survived there, its enemies foolishly imagining they have driven it out of existence. But such only makes it pure and strong, and it soon appears again, utterly unchanged from its primal purity. You may hear many a lamentation about the deplorable condition of today's church. When you hear such, you may be sure the speaker's eyes are not on the one true church of the Living God, but that poor travesty seen in denominational and local churches. The Bride of Christ is not declining. If anything she is becoming more glorious. Christ is doing to it according to his unchanging

and indefeatable purpose, and presenting it to Himself unblemished without spot or wrinkle.

This megamystery is not something created out of time and mortality. She and her Husband are eternal entities. It is something that has ever existed in the Mind of the Almighty having been brought into manifest light in the fullness of time. And because she always has been, she forever will be. That is our personal future, we having obtained an inheritance according to His predestined purpose among them that are sanctified.

All of this being true, the one true church of the Living God, the one that Christ is building, His Body and His Bride, can only be the "invisible," or "universal," *ekklesia*, the "called out" of God. It is invisible because it is one with the kingdom of God, of which Christ told the Pharisees it "does not come with observation" (Luke 17:20-24). It is universal in that it cannot be localized. Like salt and light it is diffused everywhere from one end of the earth to the other all at the same time (Luke 17:23-24). It literally fills the earth. (Daniel 2:34-35, 44-45). If an answer as to where the Kingdom and the church may be found, the answer must be, wherever Christ is, it is (Luke 17:37). It is irresistibly called out to Him.

The big question looming now is, "what about the local church which is a powerful living reality abundantly testified in the epistles?" That will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER II**The Local Assembly**

In the previous chapter we noted that the word translated “church” in the English Bible is the Greek *ekklesia*, which translates literally as the “called out”. Our English word “church” is derived from the Greek *kuriakon* which always has reference to a pagan temple of idols and is never used in the Bible in reference to the called out people of God. Three times in the Bible *ekklesia* is used of a secular gathering, and translated in our English Bible “assembly”. The other one hundred and twelve times it occurs in the New Testament, it has reference to God’s called out elect, and translated “church”. The word “church” is also used of a denomination in distinction from other denominations of Christianity, and of a building where people meet for religious purposes. It is used of all Christians of a state or nation. It is used in the name given to a particular association of professing Christians who regularly assemble in a certain locality. And it is used of all the elect and redeemed people of God. The last two are the only Biblical usages of *ekklesia* in respect to the people of God, and therefore, the only ones with which we are concerned. In the previous issue we undertook to determine what idea of the church met the criteria set in the Bible, particularly the church of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 16:18. It was demonstrated that the criteria left us by the Lord and the Apostles permits only one strict concept of the church that Christ built. That is the “universal, invisible” entire body of elect believers of all time.

This conclusion creates the prominent practical problem of this great mystery, to wit: 1) *Ekklesia* is used over eighty times in the scripture of a local gathering of believers or “local church”. All seven of those churches mentioned in Revelation were local churches (It is significant also that they all were impermanent, died and disappeared). 2) The regular congregational gathering, assembling, the prominent “one another” aspect of the *ekklesia* cannot be realized on this earth in an invisible/universal church. 3) The strong desirability, if not necessity,

of some sort of commitment to, and identification with, a local body of Christians. It is possible for a Christian to survive without this, even necessary sometimes, but it is not what we find in the Bible. It can be demonstrated and argued, of course, from Paul's own pilgrimage, that a Christian may be isolated for a while, but the normal course of life in Christ will bring Christians together. There can be no denying or mistaking the fact that the majority of practical Christian experience revolves around distinctly separate local congregations. How may this be reconciled with the singularity and perfect unity of the one true church of the living God, and the fact that no local church can measure up to the real mystical body of Jesus Christ?

Wrong Answers

The Roman Church, while alleging itself to be the "One Holy Catholic (universal) Church", sought to satisfy this criterion by merging local congregations under its power by dioceses, overseen by bishops and Cardinals, and identifying the local congregations by the buildings (churches) from *kirks* > *kuriakons* in which they met. Protestant, or Reformed (those churches admitting their origins in the Roman Catholic monolith) departed but little from this system, maintaining central power in the State or denominational hierarchy, while ruling the local congregation in their respective parishes by bishops or presbyteries, whose power was derived from said central denominational headquarters. These see themselves as the one unified church with scattered congregations, although they permit those congregations to call themselves churches. All of these, therefore, attempt to leave the scriptural weight of one universal unified church intact. Scores of reasons, however, deny that any or all of them can be the one exclusive church that Christ builds.

Non-Catholic, non Protestant congregations (those who claim descent from pre-Constantinian Christianity) however, in reaction against the errors of the above, commonly try to resolve the one universal church versus multiple local church problem by heavily emphasizing the local church, while minimizing or outright denying the existence of a universal church at all. The most radical and vocal of these are Baptist Landmark churches who, not only affirm that the only concept of a church is a local one, but that the only valid church, the one true bride of Christ, is a Baptist church. People who are members of non-Baptist churches may be saved and in the "kingdom of God" but are only "guests" at the wedding of Christ to His church.

The most formidable obstacle to the credibility of this local-church-only view is the many times *ekklesia* is used in the singular when no particular local congregation is in view, but the whole body of Christ. In such cases, local-church-only advocates argue that "the church" must be viewed as an abstract institution as "the home" or "the state". Therefore when Christ spoke of building His church, He was not speaking of a single concrete entity, but only an abstract organization which would be fleshed out in localities all over the earth. This concept must do violence to the word our Lord chose to use as a description of what He was doing. "My *ekklesia*" can only mean "my called out". Local-church-only advocates, therefore, attempt to divorce the word from its original meaning and give it the definition of "assembly". The Lord, they say, seized on a corporate entity that already existed in the Greek political and social scene as something similar to what He was building, much like using "my sheep" to illustrate His people. This Greek *ekklesia* was an assembly called out and gathered by herald to deal with and settle a community problem. Local-church-only advocates ignore the called out aspect of this assembly and put all the emphasis on "assembly". This concept sees the church only in its assembled mode. In fact the church exists only in those hours during which it is assembled. When it is dismissed and dispersed it does not exist! The substitution of assembly for called out is a premise absolutely essential to the argument against a universal church. But this premise is not only weak; it is untenable. In every place where the church is said to assemble in one place (I Cor. 14:23) it was the church before it assembled, and still the church when it dispersed.

If Jesus were only looking for an existing Greek word by which to describe the gathering of His people to Himself, and the principle visible criteria of such a people was their assembling in a particular locality, He would have used one of the words for assembly or gathering in common usage at the time. The distinction of *ekklesia* (called out) from *paneguris* (assembly) is clear when the two are used to express the two ideas in Hebrews 12:23. The called out will at that time be finally all assembled or gathered. Until then we are not essentially the assembled or gathered, but the called out.

The idea of a peculiarly elected, called out and separated people of God out of the whole of a fallen race is prominent in the scriptures from righteous Abel forward. The second book in the Bible, Exodus (the Exit) takes its name from this prevailing redemptive principle. God is calling out His chosen people from the bondage, the slavery, and the

corruption of the world typified in Egypt. Even the Lord Jesus Christ, in order to perfectly identify with the people He came to redeem, had to fulfil that "called out" criteria (Hosea 11:1). As a child He was taken down into Egypt, ostensibly to prevent Herod's murderers from killing Him. But since when does God have to flee and hide from madmen? No, He was taken down to Egypt in order to fulfil Hosea's prophesey (Matt.2:15), which prophesey was given in order to fulfil the called out criteria of the Christian church. This mark of separation as the critical mark of the people of God is emphasized in II Corinthians 6:14-7:1, drawn from the prophecy of Isaiah 55:11, and invoked again in Revelation 18:4. Sheep are indeed an appropriate metaphor of Christians and the Christian church in many aspects. But the Greek civil *ekklesia* resembles it only in the fact that it is called by herald. Local church only advocates, however, choose to ignore that single similarity (I will leave it to the reader to guess why) and use "assembly", a word or state which in no way qualifies acceptance as God's people or signifies anything other than a group of people who get together for some purpose.

Local Churches Come up Short

The fact of the matter is the peculiar marks of the true church are either non-existent in the institutional church, or so dimly and weakly present, it utterly fails to be the power and light that Christ ascribed to His mystical Body to wit: 1) Its inseparable identity with Christ, every member in vital organic union with Him and with one another, each and every member a true Christian. 2) The true vital headship of Christ. 3) Its constitution of all the elect of God. 4) Its true spiritual unity. 5) True holiness in all its members. 6) The real "salt of the earth" and "light of the world". 7) Its permanence and invincibility.

As loudly as it may claim to have such power and authority as the Lord ascribes to His church, the local church simply does not have the keys of the kingdom. Its attempts to bind and loose are vain and feckless. Acting as a corporate executive, it has no power to remit or retain sins. It may vote to "deliver someone over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh", but neither hell nor heaven takes any note of it.

A local church may claim to "authorize" Baptism or the Lord's Supper, evangelism, missions, and the establishment of other churches. But these are only vain arrogation of men. There is not a shred of evidence either in precept, precedent or principle for such authority: Not in the words of our Lord or the writings of the apostles. Neither the organized

church nor its officers have such spiritual authority. We are exceedingly taxed to try to keep a straight face at some of these pretensions. A pastor, evangelist, or missionary gets a particular project, enterprise, mission or ministry in his mind. It may or may not be inspired by the Holy Spirit, but he dares not undertake it until it is authorized by the local church. It has to be made to appear as originating and having its very roots in the church itself. So he brings it to the church, promotes it and persuades the church to authorize it. It is then ballyhooed as a ministry originating and thrust forth by the church. Please! Everyone knows it is the *minister's* ministry, and if it be a genuine one, it was instigated by Christ in the heart of the man, being authorized by Him in Matthew 28:18-20. Unless those words of Christ were spoken to those eleven men only (in which case the commission expired with their deaths), it was spoken to the church. Churches do not send missionaries. The Lord of the harvest does. The Lord sends the church! And it cannot go while it is assembled. It must be scattered to do its job. It is well, good and orderly that the local congregation (as well as other Christians and churches) should give various ministries its blessing and support, but the church's vote has no more given it divine authority than a priest's incantation of "*hoc est corpus meum*" transforms bread and wine into the body of Christ!

In fact, there is no authority in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ other than Himself. Our Lord made this abundantly clear in Matthew 20:25-28. Kings of the gentiles exercise authority over the people. The leadership of the Christian church does not! Pastors, bishops of both regional and local organized entities far too often reign as "kings of the gentiles" exercising authority over the people. Such dangerously border on behaving as petty popes, arrogant, insecure, jealous of their "authority", demanding submission and loyalty to themselves. In contrast, the greatest in the body of Christ is the most humble, diligent and tireless *servant* of the saints. Leadership in the church of the Lord is implemented in self-giving, self-denying, submission and obedience. The leader's life and service is mandated by the needs of his charges, not the other way around!

The headship of Christ must be practically subverted in the organized institution. In the denominational church, it is usurped by the denomination. In the independent church, autonomy effectively overthrows the headship of Christ. It is either confiscated by the leadership, or (by majority vote), the will of a mob which will be ruled by

no one, not even Christ. In either of these cases the individual Christian who would live in obedience to his living Head is often branded as a rebel for doing so! Does the believer have two spiritual heads? A monstrosity! Is the headship of Christ mediated through another man? That is pure Romanism, the Nicholaitanism hated by the Lord. A false mediatorial "authority" has been interposed between the believer and his Head, Who is the only true Mediator between man and God, the Man Christ Jesus.

As unwelcome and shocking the thought might be, a local-church-only position combined with this overthrow and subversion of the headship of Christ is necessary for the purposes of some pastors. How else could one undertake to "build a great church", promote and prosecute specific programs shaped and ordered to proliferate churches of a specific brand, increase membership, amass money, power and influence in the world? A universal church cannot develop creeds and doctrines designed to make distinctions between itself and other Christians, and drive wedges between those who fellowship with Christ. As unkind as it may seem, this reminds me of a prominent "mega-church" pastor, who as a young man, preached the Bible truths of divine sovereignty, election and predestination, and later publicly repudiated them. When questioned about why he did so, he admitted those truths to be Biblical, but that he abandoned them "because you cannot preach them and build and promote a great church for Christ". There you have it! If we are dissatisfied with Christ's progress in building His church, we must overthrow His headship, take it up ourselves, and do a better job!

No local church comes anywhere near to representing that one complete body, replete with every needed gift, and ministry, as declared in I Corinthians 12:13-27 and Ephesians 4:11-16. Such independent autonomy is a fanciful myth. Every local church and every member draws vital spiritual needs and nurture from members of other local churches both living and dead! Even while vaunting their autonomy and independence they are ever bringing in ministers and other saints from other congregations, reading their books, and drawing on what has been taught and passed down to them by believers who have long been with that company of just men made perfect.

Creeping Worldly Corruption

Local churches tend to become “things”, an organization, a public corporate entity, rather than a living organism. And as such, certain necessary evils attach themselves, which always corrupt it and mandate its apostasy.

Ownership of real estate subjects it to laws, regulations and responsibilities of society and public entities. Someone has to be legally responsible to the State. In order for the responsible agents to act under the authority of the church there must be an identifiable membership. There must be legally defined qualifications for such membership and the right to vote. There must be means to remove such persons from the rolls and deprive them of voting rights. In order to facilitate all this there must be a constitution, by-laws, and rules of order. Such constitutions and by-laws, as well as the desire for some semblance of unity, require covenants, creeds, and confessions. While these confessions make an external mechanical and legal unity within the membership, they erect barriers between these people and every other Christian and local church on earth. They also subvert the word of God. A preacher must either give his heart to the language of the Bible or to that of the creed. He cannot do both. Local churches soon learn they cannot do much without help from the Christian community outside their own membership. So they either panhandle other churches to support their programs or join denominations, start new ones, or at the very least, set up associations. These associations, in turn become public entities and must have the same membership, qualified by constitutions, by-laws, covenants, confessions and creeds. This ushers in all the evils, the chicanery, the strife and contention and perversions of the world's politics and power struggles. These inevitable politics and power abuses soon has the whole sordid mess behaving again like “kings of the gentiles”. An insatiable thirst for money to operate its machinery and finance its programs and enterprises makes tax breaks an absolute necessity. Such churches and their associations have now become approved governmental entities and are at the mercy of its social, commercial, civil and criminal laws, vulnerable to its lawyers and lawsuits. Its freedom in Christ is gone. What a mess!!!!

A Biblical Local Church

What are we to think? How may we think of a local church as a scriptural one? First, we should legitimize the application of *ekklesia* to the local church. Since only the one universal body of Christ can meet the criteria of the one that Christ builds, and since the Bible uses the word in respect to local congregations (assemblies) the word must be accorded a secondary *usage* when applied to a local assembly. In that sense separate local congregations may be, and are, scripturally called churches.

What are we then to do? How may we distinguish between a scriptural local church (which are relatively rare) and a spurious one (which are plentiful)? A local church may be considered a scriptural one when it may be considered the *ekklesia*, the "called out" of the Lord (all the Christians) in a particular location in a city, geographical area, or those gathered at a particular meeting house. In these modern times when non-essential doctrines and divisions mandated by creeds and confessions of men have divided true Christians, rarely do all Christians in a given geographical location assemble in the same meeting house, but meet in separate ones distinguished by various names. This is a sad, but inescapable fact, and one with which we must live charitably.

A valid local church must be contemplated as a living organism, not a **thing**! If it is "planted" by a man, a denomination, a para-church organization, or another local church it will surely be a **thing**. It can be a valid church only if it is planted by the Lord. It is something that rises, comes into being, and grows of necessity out of evangelism, the work Christ sent us to do, witnessing, preaching the gospel and making disciples of Christ. **He did not send us to plant local churches!**

This organism is not an autonomous one. It is brought into being by its marriage, its inseparable union with Christ, Who is its Head, and from Whom it draws all its vitality. Such dependence, union and vitality are both corporate and personal. Every member draws all his vitality from personal union with Christ. Nor is it spiritually independent from the whole body of Christ. It draws vitality from the saints everywhere and of all time (I Cor. 3:21-23). Such criteria as this may be discerned not so much by researching its history, its founding, its covenant, constitutions or confessions as by the following:

Its holiness. I am not here speaking of sinless perfectionism. Nor am I speaking of outward morality and rectitude. Admirable integrity, honesty and uprightness can

be found in abundant measure among people who have no use for God, or by religionists who know nothing of Christ. By holiness, I mean people who have been separated unto Christ. God fills their horizon. Christ is their life, the Lord and Governor of everything, not just a postscript to sanctify their own independent way. They are not merely religious, but devout worshippers of the true and living God.

Its worship. True believers are warm-hearted fervent worshippers! The Father seeks such worshippers. They worship God! They glory in Christ! They do this out of their hearts, in the Holy Spirit. They are not choreographed or programmed in this by preachers, song leaders and electronic claptrap. They do it spontaneously. They do it orderly. They do it heartily, vigorously, joyously. They do not "do" songs; they sing! They do not merely "say" or "lead" prayers; they pray! They testify, exhort and encourage one another.

Its unity. There is no wrangling among themselves. They may have great diversity among them in personality, gifts, and ministries. They may even have a wide variety of views on non-essential subjects. But they are absolutely unified in what is essential. That is true spiritual unity.

Its love. They love one another. They watch over one another, are sensitive and careful to share all they have for any need that may arise. They forgive and forbear. They are longsuffering, kind, self-giving and supportive.

Its doctrine. Its preaching and teaching. Sound doctrine that is intensely Biblical, practical, helpful and timely. Such feeding of the sheep will be wholesome and effectual to the health and vitality of the saints. It is a pillar and ground of truth!

Its Imperfections

Ah! Here is the rub. How much of this must we tolerate, endure, forebear? Because this is a *local* church, and *ekklesia* is being used here in a less than definitive way (It is not the one true church that Christ is building), in most cases it will harbor hypocrites and false professors. Mortal men cannot infallibly separate the wheat from the chaff. There will also be babes in Christ, the immature, weak and stumbling children of God. There will often be glaring weaknesses and inadequacies in the

leadership. There will be those genuine children of God who will sorely try the power of Christian grace in our lives. This is precisely why the Scriptures repeatedly exhorts us to love, forbearance, longsuffering and forgiveness. We are also taught to reprove, exhort, pray for and watch over one another. None of this would be necessary if these grievous imperfections did not exist. We are being taught to be like the mighty Captain of our faith, the Lord Jesus Christ Who loved us while we were yet sinners. Christians are mini-christs, joyfully giving themselves for one another.

As in the beginning, the Lord put the man in the Garden (the best possible place on earth for him), we consider our local gathering of saints, our local church, to be our Garden, our island of paradise, our oasis, our Beulah in the barren waste howling wilderness of this world. With all its imperfections, there is no place on earth so sweet, blessed, peaceful, joyful and comforting as the gathering of the saints. We are here by God's appointment. This is our divinely designated place of pasture, of service, self-sacrifice and giving; and the arena in which we each and every one shall grow up to the measure and likeness of Jesus.

CHAPTER III**The Wonder and Glory Of This Great Mystery**

"...the house of God which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory." (I Tim. 3:15-16) "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church." (Eph.5: 32)

We have been exploring this "great mystery" which is the church of the living God. In today's vocabulary "church" is applied to a denomination, a state church or simply a building. There is no mystery in any of these. The principle controversy centers on the only Biblical applications of *ekklesia*: That of a local church, consisting of only those members who assemble regularly at a particular location, and that of a universal church consisting of all the redeemed people of God everywhere throughout all time. There is no mystery whatever about a local church organized and operated by men, ruled by human authority, consisting of membership and activities, which are qualified and governed by humanly devised constitutions, by-laws and creeds. That sort of thing is altogether common among organizations of men. The only concept that meets the scriptural criteria of the church that Christ builds and whose real spiritual life, glories, powers, privileges and possessions render it a *great mystery*, is that of the universal church, the real mystical body of Christ. In a previous chapter we noted that although the word *ekklesia* can properly only designate the truly called of God, the universal church, it has a secondary usage in the Bible by which it is commonly applied to local churches.

The above quoted text in I Timothy is immediately followed by a prophecy of corruption and apostasy. This corruption can only occur in the denominational or local church which, for the sake of brevity, we will designate the "institutional" church, in contrast to the real mystical

Body of Christ which is a living organism. In this chapter we wish to focus on the true church, the body of Christ as typified in Ephesians 5:23-32 by godly marriage.

Its Builder and Its Emergence

The founder and builder of the church of the living God is Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:13-19). The church, of course, is an eternal entity. We were given to Christ by the Father in the eternal counsels of God (John 10:29, II Tim. 1:9), and are only brought into manifestation and appearance in these last days (II Tim. 1:10). That the church has been a hidden mystery in times past, and has only now been made manifest cannot, in the slightest, be interpreted as its being non-existent until the earthly ministry of the Savior or until Pentecost (Eph. 3:3-6). This hidden, eternal pre-existence and temporal appearance in the fullness of time is part of that "great mystery of godliness" testified in II Tim. 3:16:

Christ's incarnation. *"God was manifest in the flesh"*. His **vindication in His resurrection.** *"justified in the Spirit"*. **Witnessed by heaven's messengers.** *"Seen of angels"*. **Universally preached.** *"Preached unto the gentiles"*. **Universally believed.** *"Believed on in the world"*. **Glorified.** *"Received up into glory"*. While Christ was on earth, He was the Incarnate Word of truth and godliness, the only light of the world. With His departure and subsequent outpouring of the Spirit, the church became, and remains, Christ's godliness and light in this world, the pillar and ground of truth.

The rock-solid foundation upon which this church, this great mystery of piety, is built is by means of a God-given revelation of the Person of Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:17-18). This is nothing less than regeneration, a divine infusing of spiritual life into the souls of God's elect people imparting life and light to dead, blind, spiritually senseless sinners. This is also known as the effectual call. That is what creates the *ekklesia*, the called out! Nothing less can bring them to Christ. Nothing more is needed, for it unfailingly gets the job done (John 6:37). They are *compelled* to come to Him, not unwillingly, but joyfully. This is the "seal and foundation of God" that stands sure (II Tim. 2:19). The Lord knows who are His.

None can get into the church who do not know Christ. Every member of this church is *added* to the church by divine revelation and understanding. He does not "join" it by being voted in by other

members or through acceptance by the presbytery. He is *taught* by Christ himself (Eph. 4:20-21). The called and separated are invariably gathered in specific localities and a local church appears. That is the fixed pattern in the Bible.

Sorrowfully, there is a ruinous departure from this pattern among sincere, but ambitious and misled men. Christ did not send us to plant, organize or build churches. He alone is the Builder. He sent us to preach the gospel, to make disciples of people. We are exhorted to evangelize, to edify, to feed the flock of God, to build them up in the faith. When we do that, existing churches are strengthened, and new local churches appear where there were none before. But when men undertake to plant churches after their own liking and brand, giving them creeds and confessions (which the people are largely unable to even understand let alone pledge themselves to), what results is an institution that can only be called a thing! It is not the *ekklesia* of God. The leaven of this well-intended, but misguided, practice has corrupted the whole local church scene! We create this thing then wring our hands and wail over its carnality and deadness! In vain we may cry out for "revival" or "reformation" of these. Men's fleshy inventions may be reformed a thousand times, but will still be carnal. That which is of flesh is flesh. These, our Ishmaels, will never live before God, and cannot be "revived".

Its Purification and Presentation

"That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word," (Eph. 5:26) The sanctification of the church, the body of Christ, is not a post-conversion experience or a series of climaxes. Nor is it a process that is gradually being brought to pass in this present life. That is growth in grace, a blessed reality, but it is not purification or sanctification. Nor is it something that is accomplished just before our death or in our translation at His coming. No, our sanctification is our *calling*! The *ekklesia* is sanctified in its very inception, by the call itself! The call is *out*! It utterly separates us from sin, the world, the flesh, and the devil. It may take a while to get the fish, melons, onions, garlic, and cucumbers out of our palates, but Egypt has been left behind for good. That is the condition of our becoming sons and daughters. Paul quotes the condition of acceptance before God from Isaiah 52:11. *"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing: and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto*

you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters" (II Cor. 6:17-18). This is not an admonition for the church to purify itself, but a condition of coming to Christ. Christ is light and has *no* communion or fellowship with darkness (II Cor. 6:14-16). Anything less than separation is not salvation. Whoever has not been separated from the darkness of this world is not in the body of Christ. Christ has no fellowship with Satan and the darkness of his works; neither can His body. We are told in I John 1:6 that if we profess fellowship with Christ and yet walk in darkness we lie. If we, on the other hand, confess our sins He is faithful and just to "*forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" (I John 1:9). We are not told the church ought to be subject to Christ in all things, but that it *is*! (Eph. 5:24) The institutional church that is not separated from the world and which is not subject to Christ in all things is not the *ekklesia* of God, but a thing!

It is absolutely necessary that the church be purified, made unblemished and spotlessly perfect in its initial calling, for it is to be immediately presented to Christ as His Bride. When a man marries a woman, he does not gradually remove her from her father's house: he immediately separates her away from her former life and brings her home with him. Christ united with His church is a condition that exists on this earth already. It could not illustrate anything if it were not something very real that can be presently pointed to. The church is not said to be Christ's fiancée, but His bride! As His wife she is said to be in subjection to Him in all things. The marriage of Christ to His church is not something that will take place in heaven after the resurrection and judgment. Those who are being taught to look forward to a future "Marriage Supper of the Lamb" may be in danger of missing the wedding completely! Every redeemed sinner is called out of darkness into the Light and immediately presented to Christ in legal and vital union with Him. We do not have to be waiting around, longing for the day when we will be united forever with Him. We are exhorted to reckon on and abide in that oneness with Him now. We should be living in the glorious reality that we have been raised up and are sitting in heavenly places with Him now! As surely as we are now, already, the sons of God (I John 3:2), the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:27), the habitation of God (Eph. 2:22), new Jerusalem from above (Gal. 4:26), we are now the Bride of Christ. The Bride is the wife (Rev. 21:9). As the Bride of Christ, the people of God are known as God's peculiar possession, His inheritance (Duet. 32: 9), the glory of which He would now have displayed and known (Eph. 1:18).

Its Glory

Christ presents the church to Himself "a glorious church" (Eph. 5:27). Her glory is in her holiness and spotlessness. That holiness is wrought in His separating her to Himself by the washing of the word. Such glory that is may not yet be seen in its fullness, but it is already what it shall be seen to be (I Jn. 3:2). Full revelation of the purity of the church is hindered by the sinful mortal bodies to which we are bound until they are put off, and we are clothed with glorified ones. Then when all those spots and blemishes of the mortal body are seen no more she will shine in her full beauty. That is why Paul could declare in Col. 1:27-28, "*Christ in you, the hope of glory: Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.*"

Effectually, all her glory is bound up in Him. As in the hymn, "*The Lamb is all the glory in Immanuel's Land.*" Such glory of the Bride that is hers by virtue of union with her Husband is put on full display now (Eph. 3:10). "*Unto Him be glory in the church by Jesus Christ throughout all ages, world without end*" (Eph. 3:21). How is Christ glorified and magnified in His church?

He is glorified in her faith, her obedience, and her perseverance in trials, persecution and suffering.

He was glorified in Abraham when he forsook his country, his people, struck out not knowing where he was going or how he would know when he arrived, a wealthy prince living as a transient hobo, looking for a city whose builder and maker is God. Glorified when he spared not his only God-given son, confident God was able to raise him up, since he was promised to be the patriarch of many nations.

He was glorified in Joseph, who shrank not from declaring the truth of God's revelation at the cost of incurring the hatred of his brethren. Glorified when he fled the embrace of his master's wife, incurring her wrath and prison, rather than dishonor the name of his God.

He was glorified in Moses, he who could have been the Pharaoh, but who esteemed the *reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt!* He chose rather to suffer affliction with the *people of God* than the pleasures of sin for a season.

He was glorified in Joshua and Caleb, who in defiance of the "majority report" believed and followed God wholly with all their hearts and hastened to engage fearsome adversaries, counting their God able.

He was glorified in Achan who, rather than dishonor the righteous commandment and judgment of God, confessed his sin and willingly accepted the weight of penalty for his sin.

He was glorified in Rahab who, forsaking her own native country, at risk of her own life and those of her family, believed God, protected His messengers and, as Ruth the Moabitess, made the people of God her people, casting her lot with them.

He was glorified in Job, who proved the devil to be a liar and false accuser, refusing to abandon his faith though he lost everything.

How mightily He was glorified in Stephen, Peter, Paul, John, and in all the Apostles. How sublimely He is glorified in suffering martyrs of every generation and in every saint who forsakes all to follow Christ!

Christ is glorified in the church's love for Him and for one another. He is glorified in the saint's self-giving sacrifices and service to one another. He is glorified in her kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, and selflessness. He is glorified in her unabashed, robust, hearty worship and adoration of Him, her perpetual bold and confident witness in the face of a sneering, contemptuous, hostile world.

If these and other graces of the Lord Jesus are not unmistakably displayed in what claims to be the church, it is not the *ekklesia* of God, but an institution planted and organized by men, the Thing!

The Church's Supper

Christ feeds his Bride, the church. *"For no man ever yet hated his own flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church."* (Eph. 5:29) Tables, dining (drinking and eating) consistently signify the communion of religious life and faith all through the Bible. They speak of vital nourishment necessary to sustain *life*! Paul, in speaking of Israel's apostasy in Romans 11:9 quotes from Psalm 69:22, *"Let their table become a snare"*. Jesus made prominent use of the supper as an illustration of the offer of the gospel, and of the gathering in of God's elect, in the parables of Luke 14: 18-24 and Matthew 22. Paul speaks of the impossibility of fellowship with both demons and Christ by declaring, *"Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils; ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table and the table of devils"* (I Cor. 10:15-21). In this respect all humanity has spiritual communion, dines at one (or more) of three tables: The table of man (Eccl. 6:7)...fleshy lusts, the table of demons (religion less Christ); or the table of the Lord: *"Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!"* (Luke 14:15 b)

No other figure in Christianity is more prominent in scripture than that of Christ feeding His people. He is the Good Shepherd (feeder). He feeds, folds, cares for, protects, and shelters His sheep. He is the Door by Whom they go in and out and find pasture for their souls (John 10). They never want for any thing. He leads them beside still waters, makes them to lie down in green pastures, and prepares a table for them in the presence of their enemies. Their cups overflow (Psalm 23). Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled! The primary, thrice repeated command of Jesus to Peter was "*feed my sheep*". Why did He repeat it three times? Above all, He will have His sheep fed! The elder's first responsibility is not "soul-winning" or administration, but to feed the flock of God which He has purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28). That this is a universal table, and includes the saints of all ages, is testified in Matthew 8:11 and Luke 22:29-30.

The church's supper is not what is called "The Sacrament of Communion", or the ordinance of The Lord's Supper. That is a ritual, an enactment, symbolizing the death of our Lord, given us in order to keep His sacrifice fresh in our remembrance. The elements are sparse, and the ceremony itself ineffectual to nourish any one. The real Lord's Supper is that abundant robust spiritual food upon which the saints feast every day. This is the real mystical "marriage supper of the Lamb" to which we are called.

What is served at this "Marriage supper of the Lamb"? What do we feed upon? We feed on truth, light, the word of God. We feast on the glorious realities, presence, power, comforts of the Living God, His glories, wonders, attributes, perfections, and faithfulness. We feast on fellowship with the saints. The joy, comforts, edification, and encouragement that flow between one another in the church; that nutrition that flows from the Head through all the "*joints and bands*" (Col.2: 19). We also feed one another. But most of all, we feed on Christ Himself. He is the living Bread that came down from heaven. We are nourished by ingesting Him and all His graces. He is the continued manna, fresh and plentiful every morning. He is that fresh, aromatic showbread arousing and stimulating our spiritual senses every morning; continually renewing, empowering, enabling and invigorating the inner man. Christ Himself is that Bread that came down from heaven of which we eat and never hunger again, that River of Living Waters of which the thirsty drink and never thirst again, for He is ever springing up within us.

Christ, He Himself, is our present, and forever, ever-living, reigning Head, Husband, and Provider. We will never be neglected, abused, unnourished, unprotected, unclothed, unhoused, widowed or left alone. We are His Bride, and He is our Husband forever!

Editor's Introduction

The following article came to my attention after the last part of Megamystery was published. It is an excerpt from William Dell's work, *The Way of True Peace & Unity* (1649), included in a compilation of the "Army Debates" (1647-1649), and published by University of Chicago Press under the title of *Puritanism and Liberty*. Dell, who at various times served as secretary to William Laud of Canterbury, as chaplain to General Fairfax, and as Master of Gonville and Caius College, was an intense "enthusiast" and a vocal foe of rationalism and intellectualism as it imposed itself on spiritual matters and life of the Christian Church. At the time of this writing, the Civil War is over, Charles I has been tried and condemned by the Rump Parliament, and executed. The Monarchy is dissolved, and Oliver Cromwell is coming to power. The Army Debates are considering how to replace the Episcopacy with a free church, and Dell is signaling them that they do not need to do that, that Christ is quite capable of ordering His own kingdom without the help or supervision of the powers of this world. I have not seen from a Puritan pen so powerful, comprehensive, thorough-going, and so singularly and primitively Biblical a work on the nature and characteristics of the true Christian Church. Dell pulls no punches about anything. It is doubtful that such a frank and unmitigated exposure of church abuse, along side such an affirmation of its divine powers and liberties could have made it to the presses at any other time in seventeenth century England than in this narrow window that God providentially opened before Cromwell's death and the Monarchy and Royal Episcopacy were restored in 1660. Nor are the abuses addressed peculiar to that time. Dell's words are quite relevant today. That this man who lived 350 years ago in an ecclesiastical atmosphere totally unlike the one today should see so clearly in the Bible the same ekklesia of God that we now understand is a striking testimony to the timelessness, purity and immutability of divine truth. For the digging out of this priceless literary jewel we are indebted to John Sweezy of Lafayette LA, who is ever rummaging through old books and manuscripts for this sort of treasure.

— C. M.

Chapter IV**A SPIRITUAL CHURCH**

By

William Dell

Now, that he that reads may understand, it is necessary for me, speaking of the unity and peace of the Church, to tell you now, at first, that I intend not to propound any way of peace either between the Church and the world, or between the carnal and spiritual children of the Church, as having learned no such thing out of the word of God.

First, not between the Church and the world: for the Lord never intended any reconciliation and agreement between these in the spiritual and eternal things of the kingdom of God. For these are two distinct seeds and sorts of people; the one from beneath, the other from above; the one the seed of the woman, the other the seed of the serpent; and between these two God hath put such an enmity that no man can take away. Wherefore they, who never minding these two different seeds between whom God hath put such irreconcilable enmity, would make all the people of one or more whole kingdoms a church at once, and would reconcile all of them together in the things of God, and in the ways of his worship, according to devices and methods of their own: *these men* know not what they do, for they walk in the darkness of their own hearts, and not in the light of the Word; which shows us clearly that it is as possible to reconcile Michael and the devil, as the angels of both.

Neither, secondly do I find any way in the Word to reconcile all those together, who are commonly called the Visible Church, seeing even among these there are two distinct sorts of children, as Paul teacheth us: one sort of those that are born after the flesh, as Ishmael and Esau, and another of those who are born after the Spirit, as Isaac and Jacob; and there is as great enmity between these in the church as between the former in the world; for they that are born after the flesh,

are always persecuting them that are born after the Spirit, but never agreeing with them.

The right Church then is not the whole multitude of the people whether good or bad, that join together in an outward form or way of worship. And therefore I shall not speak of this church. But the church I shall speak of is the true Church of the New Testament, which I say, is not any outward or visible society, gathered together into the consent or use of outward things, forms, ceremonies, worship, as the churches of men are; neither is it known by seeing or feeling, or the help of any outward sense, as the society of mercers, or drapers, or the like; but it is a spiritual and invisible fellowship, gathered together in the unity of faith, hope, and love, and so into the unity of the Son, and of the Father by the Spirit; wherefore it is wholly hid from carnal eyes, neither hath the world any knowledge of judgment of it.

This true Church is the communion of saints, which is the communion believers have with one another; not in the things of the world, or in the things of man, but in the things of God. For as believers have their union in the Son, and in the Father, so in them also they have their communion; and the communion they have with one another in God cannot be in their own things, but in the things, even in his light, life, righteousness, wisdom, truth, love, power, peace, joy. This is the true communion of saints, and this communion of saints is the true Church of God.

Now this true church of God differs from the churches of men in very many particulars, as follows.

In the churches of men members are admitted through an outward confession of doctrine; but none are admitted into this true Church but through a new birth from God and his Spirit (John 3:3). *Except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God*, which is the right Church of the New Testament.

The churches of men knit themselves together into such societies by some outward covenant or agreement among themselves. But the true Church is knit into their society among themselves by being first knit unto Christ, their head; and as soon as ever they are one with him; and are not first one among themselves, and then after one with Christ. So that the true Church is a spiritual society knit unto Christ by faith, and knit to one another in Christ by the Spirit and love; and this makes them infinitely more one than any outward covenant they

can engage themselves in, the union wherein God makes us one, passing all the unions wherein we can make ourselves one. And so when some believers perceive the grace that is give to other, they presently fall into one communion, without any more ado, Wherefore they that are of the Church, the body, cannot deny communion to them that are in true union with Christ, the head, when they do perceive this grace. For this is considerable in this matter, that we are not first one with the Church, and then after one with Christ; but we are first one with Christ, and then one with the Church, and our union with the Church flows from our union with Christ, and not our union with Christ, from our union with the Church. Christ prays (John 17:21), *that they all* (that is, believers) *may be one is us*; so that our union is not first among ourselves, and then with the Son, and with the father, but it is first with the Son, and with the father, and then with one another in them. And Christ is the door through which we enter into the Church, and not the Church the door through which we enter into Christ. For men may join themselves to believers in the use of all outward ordinances, and yet never be joined to Christ, not to that communion which believers have in Christ; but a man cannot be joined to Christ but he is joined to all believers in the world, in the communion they have with Christ and with one another in him; which upon all occasions he enjoys with them wherever he meets with them. So that the true Church is knit up together into one body and society by one faith and Spirit; the churches of men by an outward covenant or agreement only.

The churches of men have human officers, who act in the strength of natural or acquiste parts, who do all by the help of study, learning, and the like. But in the true Church, Christ and the Spirit are the only officers, and men only so far as Christ and the Spirit dwell and manifest themselves in them. And so when they do anything in the Church, it is not they that do it, but Christ and his Spirit in them.

The churches of men have the government of them laid on men's shoulders...But the true Church hath its government laid only on Christ's shoulders. For if the Church be gathered together in Christ, as the true Church is, Christ is always in the midst of them, and if Christ is ever present with them, his own self, how cometh it to pass that Christ may not reign immediately over them? Wherefore the true Church reckons it sufficient authority that they have Christ and his word for the ground of their practice; and whatever they find in the

Word, they presently set upon the practice of it, and never ask leave either of civil or ecclesiastical powers. But the churches of men will do nothing without the authority of the magistrate or assembly, though, it be never so clear in the word of God. For in their religion they regard the authority of men more than the authority of God. The churches of men are still setting themselves one above another, but the assemblies of the true Church are all equal, having Christ and the Spirit equally present with them and in them. And therefore the believers of one congregation cannot say they have power over the believers of another congregation, seeing all the congregations have Christ and his Spirit alike among them. And Christ hath not anywhere promised that he will be more with one than with another. And so Christ and the Spirit in one congregation do not subject, neither are subjected to Christ and the Spirit in another congregation, as if Christ and the Spirit in several places should be above and under themselves. But Christ in each assembly of the faithful is their head, and this head they dare not leave, and set up a fleshy head to themselves whether it consist of one or many men, seeing Antichrist doth as strongly invade Christ's headship in many as in one man, in a council, as in a pope.

And thus having declared what the true Church of Christ is, and rectified some ancient and general mistakes touching it, I shall now proceed to make known from the clear and evident the true and only bonds of the Church's union, peace, and agreement, as the Apostle hath delivered them to us by the Spirit. Ephesians 4:4. *"There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all"*. Where note, in general, that among all those bonds of the Church's unity, the Apostle makes not so much as any mention of uniformity. But it will appear....by the Apostle's doctrine, that no conformity or uniformity are any bonds of the true Church's peace and union, seeing the Church is such a kingdom as is not preserved in its peace by any outward forms and orders, as the kingdoms of the world are, but by inward principles.

In this true Church or one body of Christ, notwithstanding diversity of members and offices, there is still an equality among them all, seeing all alike make up one body. In which regard one member is as necessary to the body as another; and no member can say to another, I contribute more to the making up of the body than thou. The most

honourable members cannot say thus to the most mean...not the Apostles themselves to believers among the Gentiles; for we are the body of Christ as well as they, and they are the body of Christ no more than we. Wherefore no member, for diversity of office, is to lift up himself above another member who is as necessary as itself to the making up of the body, and also is every whit as useful in its place.

They that do content themselves in joining to some outward and visible society and corporation of men, though called a church, and think that by being knit to them in ways of outward worship and ordinances, they live in the unity of the Church, when as yet all this while they live out of that one body that is born of the Spirit, which is the only true Church and body of Christ. He that lives out of this spiritual body, though he live in the most excellent society in the world, yet he breaks the unity of the Church, not living in one body with it. And thus many break the Church's unity, that never think on it.

Again they break this bond of the Church's unity that live in this one body, but not as members. And such are they who, having got the advantage of the magistrate's power, will needs lift themselves up above their fellow-member, and exercise authoritative, coercive, domineering power over them; whereas the very Apostles themselves were not lords of the Church, but fellow members with the faithful living in one body and under one head with them, as so did all by love and persuasion, and nothing by force and violence.

They that labour to join men into one body with the Church that are not one spirit with it, do mar the peace of it. For as unity of spirit in the Church is the bond of peace, so diversity of spirit is the breach of peace, and therefore to preserve the peace of the Church, none are to join themselves to this one body that are not of this one spirit.

As all believer are called by one calling (which is the inward and effectual voice of God to the soul, by his Spirit through the Gospel), so they are called into one blessed hope of obtaining the kingdom and glory of God. And no one is called to this hope more than another, or hath more interest or share in it than another. Fishes that live in the sea, though some be greater and some less, yet none hath more interest or share in it than another, but all, being alike produced in it, enjoy it alike. The creatures that live on the earth, though some be greater and some less, yet all enjoy the sun and air alike.

Now the government of the Church is twofold. (1) There is that government which God exercises *immediately* by himself; and (2) that government which he exercise *mediately* and by the faithful. The first of these again, that is God's immediate government is twofold: (1) the government of his special providence; (2) the government of his spiritual presence.

Now besides this immediate government of God there is another sort of government of the Church, which Christ exercises mediately by the Church. And this also is Christ's government, and not man's; and men who have not known nor understood the former government of Christ, have mistaken this also through the same unbelief. Wherefore they, not so much as minding the former government of Christ, have mistaken this also through the same unbelief. Wherefore they, not so much as minding the former government of Christ, which is immediate and by himself, have made this mediate government of the church by man to be all. And this also I say, they have understood most grossly and carnally, and not according to the Word, but according to their own ignorant and seduced hearts.

This mediate government then of Christ in the true Church (which, it may be, may better be called order and decency than government) I conceive to be nothing but this, Christ's ordering all things by the faithful, among the faithful, in reference to the communion of Saints.

The first thing then is: To whom Christ hath committed the power of ordering and managing all things in the true Church, in reference to the communion of saints? I answer, he hath given it to the true Church itself, as formerly described, even to each and all the members of it. For as natural power belongs to all natural men alike, so spiritual power (which is the true church-power) to all spiritual men alike. Christ in a believer is the root of true church-power; and because Christ dwells in all believers alike, through unity of faith, therefore all believers partake alike of spiritual and supernatural power; and no one partakes of this power more than another, any more than he partakes of Christ more than another; but Christ in them all is the self-same power of God to do all things that are to be done in the kingdom of God.

But what are these *keys* about which there hath been so great ado in the Church? I answer, they are not any outward ecclesiastical power whatever, that men have devised to serve their own turns withal. But to pass by the many false conceits, wherewith many former and present

writers have and do still trouble the Church. John doth tell us plainly (John 20:22) what Matthew means by the keys of the Church. Christ (saith he) appearing to his disciples after his resurrection, breathing on them, said *Receive the Holy Spirit* (here are the keys of the kingdom of Heaven), and then adds, *Whose sins ye remit, they are remitted, and whose sins ye retain, they are retained.* That is, when ye have received the Spirit, then you have received the keys, to bind and to loose, to remit and retain sin, and that not according to your wills, but wholly according to the mind and will and direction of the Spirit.

What is the extent of this true church-power? I answer that this power extends itself full as far as the Church, but no further. For what hath the Church to do with those that are not of the Church? *What have we to do* (saith Paul) *with them that are without?* For church-power, which is spiritual, is no more suitable to the world than worldly power, which is flesh, is suitable to the Church. The power of the Church, which is Christ's power, only reaches so far as Christ's kingdom; that is, the people that are born of God and his Spirit. True church-government reaches as far as Christ's and the Spirit's effectual influence and operation, but no further; that is to all that are willing, but to none that are unwilling. As nothing hath more troubled the Church than to govern it and give it laws, after the manner of the world, by secular force and power; so nothing hath more troubled the world than to govern it and give it laws after the manner of the Church, by the aforesaid compulsion. Wherefore as the government of the world is not to be spread over the Church, so neither is the government of the Church to be spread over the world. But as the world and the Church are distinct things in themselves, so they are to be contented with their distinct governments.

What is the outward instrument of this power? I answer, the Word only, which is the only sceptre and sword of Christ's kingdom, to govern his people and subdue his enemies. And so the true Church doth all in itself only by the Gospel; by the Gospel it bindeth and looseth; by the Gospel it remits and retains sin, by the Gospel it quickens to life and wounds to death; by the gospel it receives in, and casts out; by the Gospel it works faith, renews the life, acts, orders, guides and governs all things.

What the true Church can do by virtue of this power.

Now the true Church by the power it hath received from Christ can gather itself together when, and as often as, it pleaseth. The company of

believers have power to gather themselves together for their mutual good, instruction, preservation, edification, and for the avoiding or preventing of evil, and that without the consent or authority of any extrinsical and foreign power whatever; else Christ were not a sufficient founder of his Church. And if every free society, not subjected to tyranny, hath power in itself to congregate and come together as conveniency and necessity shall require, as is evident in all civil corporations, and in all fraternities and meetings of love; much more hath the Church of Christ, which is the freest society in the world, power to meet together into a communion of saints, though it be without and against the consent and authority of the powers of the world.

As the church of the faithful hath power from Christ to meet together, so also to appoint its own outward orders. And these things each church or communion of saints may order by itself, according to the wisdom of the Spirit, so it observe these rules. That they do all things in love, seeing all laws without love are tyranny; and so whatsoever is not from, and for, love, is not to be appointed; and if it be, it is again to be abolished; seeing no text of the scripture itself, if it build not up love is rightly interpreted. They are to do all things for peace. They must appoint nothing as of necessity; for there is no more pestilent doctrine in the Church than to make those things necessary which are not necessary. For thus the liberty of faith is extinguished, and the consciences of men are ensnared. They may persuade their orders (if they see cause) by the spirit of love and meekness, but must not enforce them upon pain of secular punishment or church-censure, as those use to do that make themselves lords and tyrants in the Church. For these outward things the Church can order only for the willing, but not for the unwilling.

Now one thing more I shall add touching the Church's power to appoint its own orders: That the true Church hath power to appoint these outward orders, not for itself only, but also for its officers (which also are part of itself), and it is not to suffer its officers to frame or impose such on it. For the Church is not the officer's but the officers are the Church's. The true Church hath power to choose its officers, and if there be cause, to reform them or depose them.

More particularly in this matter we shall inquire after these three things: (1) What officers are to be chosen? (2) Out of whom they are to be chosen? (3) By whom they are to be chosen?

For the first, Paul teaches us, *they must be faithful men, apt, and able to teach others*. For as among natural men in the world, they that have most natural power and abilities, are fittest to be the officers; so among spiritual men in the Church, they are fittest to be the officers, that have most spiritual power, that is, such in whom Christ and the Spirit are most manifest; and this the faithful of all sort are judges. Wherefore no natural parts and abilities, nor no human learning and degrees in the schools or universities, nor no ecclesiastical ordination or orders, are to be reckoned sufficient to make any man a minister, but only the teaching of God, and gifts received of Christ, by the Spirit, for the work of the ministry, which the faithful are able to discern and judge of.

Out of whom these officers are to be chosen? That is out of the flock of Christ, and nowhere else. By whom are they to be chosen? That is by the congregation or community of believers. For if every free society hath power to choose its own officers, much more hath the true Church this power, being (as is said) the freest society under heaven. And so the true Church is not to have officers thrust over them by others, but is to choose them itself.

The true Church hath power to call its councils. Now I said, the Church, *if it need a council*, may call one; because the Church of believers now seldom needs a council, seeing all things are so clear in the word of God, with which the faithful are so well acquainted. For it is not dead laws and orders, written by men will do the true Church any good; but the living Law of God, written in their hearts by the Spirit, as God hath promised to do, saying, *I will write my Law in their hearts, and put it in their inward parts*. For as the law of sin hath been written in our natures, to corrupt us, so the law of the Spirit of Life must be written also in our natures, to reform us.

The Church hath power to judge of all doctrines, and that both of its officers and councils. The clergy and ecclesiastical men have been wont to challenge to themselves the knowledge and judgment of doctrines, and have excluded ordinary Christians from it; whereas in truth, the judgment of doctrine belongeth to the people, and not to the ministers. The Apostle commands them, *to try the spirits, whether they be of God*, and hath said, *Let one or two speak, and the rest judge* (1 Cor. 14:29). By which, with many other scriptures, it is evident that the ministers are not to judge of doctrine for the people, but the people are to judge of the doctrine of the ministers, and according as they find it

to be of God, or not of God, to receive it, or reject it. For every one is to be saved by his own faith, and not by another man's. And Paul gives this liberty to Christians...yea, we have it from Christ himself whether Paul had allowed it or not: Try the very Apostles themselves and the very angels of heaven, whether they bring the right word or no.

Among the things which are to be done to procure and preserve the peace of the Church these things that follow have not the least place: The true Church is to preserve itself distinct from the world, and is neither to mingle itself with the world, nor to suffer the world to mingle itself with it. For if the Church and the world be mingled together in one society, the same common laws will no more agree to them who are of such different natures, principles and ends, than the same common laws will agree to light and darkness, life and death, sin and righteousness, flesh and Spirit. Wherefore it is not the way of peace to mingle the Church and the world, but to separate them, and to keep them distinct; that those that are of one nature and spirit may be of one communion among themselves. And this way of peace God himself teacheth us by Paul (2 Cor. 6:17) saying, *Come out from among them, my people, and be ye separate.* For to separate the Church from the world, in its communion of saints, is the only way to preserve peace in both; seeing the Church will best agree with itself and the world with itself.

The Church being thus distinct from the world is to be contented with its own power for its own affairs, and is not to introduce or entertain any power in it that is not of it. Wherefore the true Church being such a kingdom as is not of this world, stands in need of no worldly power, and being a spiritual and heavenly kingdom, is only to have and exercise a spiritual and heavenly power, seeing this power alone, and by itself, is able to accomplish the whole good pleasure of God in the Church, and to work all the works in it that God hath to do.

The third rule is, not to bring or force men into the Church against their wills.

The fourth rule is, to make void the distinction of clergy and laity among Christians. For the clergy or ecclesiastical men have all along, under the reign of Antichrist, distinguished themselves from other Christians, who they call the laity, and separated themselves from the lay in all things, and called themselves by the name of the Church, and reckoned other Christians but as common and unclean in respect of themselves; whereas in the true Church of Christ there

are no distinctions, nor difference of persons; no clergy or laity; but they are all, as Peter describes them (I Pet. 2:9), *a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, to show forth the virtues of him that called them out of darkness into his marvelous light.* And so all Christians, through the baptism of the Spirit, are made priests alike unto God; and every one hath right and power alike to speak the Word; and so there is among them no clergy or laity, but the ministers are such who are chosen by Christians from among themselves, to speak the Word to all in the name and right of all; and they have no right nor authority at all to this office but by the consent of the Church. And so presbyters and bishops, or (which is all one) elders and overseers in the Church, differ nothing from other Christians, but only in the office of the Word which is committed to them by the Church; as an alderman or common-council man in the city differs nothing from the rest of the citizens, but only in their office, which they have not of themselves neither, but by the city's choice; or as the Speaker in the House of Commons differs nothing from the rest of the Commons, but only in his office which he hath also by the choice of the House. And thus, and no otherwise, doth a minister differ from other Christians.

The fifth rule is, to keep equality between Christians. For though according to our first nativity, whereby we are born of men, there is great inequality, some being born high, some low, some honorable, some mean, some kings, some subjects etc; yet according to our new or second birth, whereby we are born of God, there is exact equality, for there are none better or worse, higher or lower, but all have the same faith, hope, love, the same God, Christ, Spirit, the same divine nature, the same precious promises, the same incorruptible crown and inheritance of saints in light.

The sixth rule is, to keep the officers of the Church in subordination to the whole Church or community; and not to suffer them to get head over it; seeing the very nature of ruling the Church is not dominion, but service.

Now if any say, by what means may the Church be able to keep out error? I answer, it may certainly keep out error by these means:

Let the Church suffer none to teach among them, that are not themselves taught of God; though they have never so great natural parts, and never so much human learning.

Let the faithful examine everything taught by the word of God, and not receive doctrines upon trust from their teachers.

And though, through God's especial goodness, the doctrine of the Gospel be again revived among us at this present time, yet ought we not to sit down content with the present state of things, but to search and see if our present doctrine do not yet err from the primitive purity and brightness of the Gospel, and that in many considerable points, and whether some or many corruptions do not yet remain among us, to be purged out by the light and truth of the Apostles' doctrine. Wherefore to conclude this thing, let us know that the Church cannot possibly keep out error longer than it precisely keeps itself to the bare and naked word of God, and tries all doctrines of their teachers by it.

The Church, that it may be able to keep out errors, must desire of God, the Spirit which he hath promised; that this Spirit of Truth may lead them into the true and spiritual knowledge of the Word, and understanding of the mind of Christ. For no man can make any right judgment of the Word he hears or reads, without the teaching of the Spirit. But believers must know that the gift of the Spirit only, without all human learning is sufficient to teach us perfectly which is truth and which error, and to make us able to judge of all doctrines of men and angels; and that all human learning in the world, without the Spirit, is not able to do this. And so a poor, plain countryman, by the Spirit which he hath received, is better able to judge of truth and error, touching the things of God, than the greatest philosopher, scholar, or doctor in the world, that is destitute of it.

Another notable means to keep error out of the Church, is to restore in it that most ancient Gospel ordinance of prophesying, which howmuchsoever it hath been out of use during the reign of Antichrist, yet is no other than the very commandment of the Lord as Paul witnesseth (I Cor. 14:31). When one man only speaks and the doctrine he preaches proves to be erroneous, error is not only preached but also goes away uncontrolled, and no way is left for the restraining of error proportionable to that of propagating it, nobody being permitted to speak to keep the people from the poison of it. But now when the right or power of prophesying is allowed to the whole Church, the minister can no sooner vent any error, but there is some believer or other, whose heart God shall move, ready to convince it by the word of God. And so error is as soon discovered and detected as it is published; and as soon destroyed as detected; the word of God, though from a private Christian, being more mighty to destroy error than error can be to uphold itself against the Word.

If they that publish doctrine should also be judges of it, and the people be bound to subscribe to their judgment, error would not only, by this means, have opportunity to be vented, but would also be established and confirmed without the least contradiction. But now God hath appointed it otherwise in the Church; for whoever speaks there, the hearers are to judge of the truth of the doctrine, and accordingly are either to receive it or reject it, having power to do either as they see occasion; and so error cannot prevail in that church where the faithful have liberty to judge of all doctrines, and do exercise that liberty.

But here now a great question will be moved... Whether the magistrate hath not power to suppress error by the sword, and whether the Church may not use this remedy against error as well as all those before named?

I answer that many men of great eminency have attributed such a power to the magistrate, thinking that religion would soon be lost if he should not uphold it. And to make this good they have produced many scriptures of the Old Testament, which seem to arm the magistrate against the authors and spreaders of errors. But I desire the wise-hearted to consider whether as clear scriptures may not be produced out of the Old Testament to prove that temporal power in the world belongs to ecclesiastical men, as that spiritual power in the Church belongs to worldly magistrates.

The putting power into the magistrate's hands to suppress error by the sword, give him full opportunity to destroy and slay the true children of God, if at any time he shall mistake and judge them heretics. For what power men ignorantly allow a godly magistrate against true heretics, the same power will all magistrates arrogate to themselves as their just due, against all that differ from themselves in matters of religion though their judgment be never so true. And thus the magistrate, who is a most fallible judge in these things, instead of tares may pluck up the wheat, and kill the faithful instead of the heretic, at his own pleasure, till he have destroyed all the faithful in the land.

If any shall yet demand whether the magistrate can do nothing at all towards the suppression of errors; I answer, this he may do: He may and ought, and if he be a godly man he will, countenance and encourage faithful ministers (that are called of God, and anointed by the Spirit) to this work of the Gospel; and having done this, he need not trouble himself any further, for the Word preached will do all the rest. and let

it not be doubted but if the truth of God do enter the lists against error, it will be infinitely able to prevail of itself alone without calling in any power, or borrowing any weapons, from the world.

Now if they be very truths wherein Christians differ, yet such wherein they may err without danger of salvation, then these rules are of use. (1) To hear them speak their judgments with freedom, and not to condemn them unheard; for thus mayst thou soon condemn the innocent and make thyself guilty. (2) To understand fully what thy adversary means before thou contend against him; lest, if thou want this wisdom and patience, thou oppose not so much his judgment as to thy own conceit. If thou canst but have patience to hear him relate his own mind, perhaps in the end thou shalt understand it differs little from thy own in substance. (3) Reproach not anything thy adversary speaks with this, that thou never heardst it before. For this may not so much discover his error as thy ignorance; and that which seems to thee a new error, if it be truly examined by the Word, may prove an old truth. And if thou wilt needs condemn whatever savours of novelty, how shall the truths we yet know not be brought in, or the errors that yet remain with us be purged out? (4) Be not over-confident in what thou holdest upon thy own judgment, or other men's strengthened from multitude, custom and antiquity. For men have erred most grossly, even in those things wherein they have thought themselves most certain. And therefore, *prove all things, that thou mayest hold fast that which is good.* (5) In these differences make the Word the judge, and not men. The word of God is the sole and perfect judge in all the things of God. Now though all have the same outward Word, yet all are not of one mind except they attain to one spirit; for Paul saith (I Cor. 2) that *only the Spirit of God knows the things of God.* Neither doth man's sense or reason understand the things of the Spirit, *but the spiritual man judgeth all things.* And hence it follows that we can only judge aright of divine truths by the Word, and we can only judge aright of the Word if we have the Spirit to be the interpreter of it to us.

Now in case the doctrine wherein we differ be such as is absolutely necessary to salvation, and without believing which men can have no interest in Christ; yet even in this case hear them speak, and be rather confident that the truth of God will prevail over their error than fearful that their error will prevail against truth. And so strive not for secular power to shut up men's mouths and to restrain men's writings, though

they speak and print things that seem never so contrary to the truth of God and doctrine of the Gospel. For if men vent errors publicly, if there be as public liberty to preach the truth I doubt not the success of the truth against it at any time with all that belongs to God. And it is the only Gospel way, to conquer error by the truth, and all human, yea and devilish doctrines, by the Gospel, which is the ministration of the Spirit and therefore so mighty that all false teachers and false doctrines must need fall down before it; seeing, *stronger is that Spirit that is in it, than that spirit that is in the world*, which is its own spirit and the devil's.

Now if upon hearing and debating things by the Word, it shall clearly appear that our adversaries hold such things which are so false and erroneous that they cannot be reckoned believers and members of Christ, nor retain those doctrines without unavoidable damnation, then in this case the true Church hath authority from the Word to do these things: To condemn the doctrine; to excommunicate their persons.

Now these things have I spoken and propounded to the faithful and churches of Christ wherever the Providence of God shall cast this book, which may travel farther on this errand than weak flesh can do, and I so propound them all as being most ready myself to hear from any what they can propound in more light and evidence of the Word.

Printed in the U.S.A
by

Shiloh Publications
608 Hwy • Hoschton, GA 30548

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P.O. Box 98 • Bentley, LA 71407