ONE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

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I

THE New Testament knows nothing of a Church which is the object of faith; it therefore knows nothing of faith in the Church. The Church, which is the fellowship of Jesus Christ, is a fact, a reality, in which one lives; it is not an invisible entity like God, in whom one believes, or like the life which is hidden in Christ. The Church is composed of people, "the saints," those who "in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ the Lord." To be sure, that which binds them together in a mysterious way is invisible, and the ground and origin of their unity are similarly invisible. But this unity itself is visible; it is visible in the gathering together for divine worship, as well as in the fellowship of the exchange of spiritual and material gifts.

Because the Church is that in which one lives as a Christian and which he daily experiences as an actuality, a doctrine of the Church has not yet been formulated. Only separate problems originating within it—such as its order, its gifts and ministrations (συναγωγή καὶ διάκονοι), its tasks both within and without—have been discussed from a practical point of view. It is only indirectly, therefore, that a "doctrine of the Church" can be obtained from the witnesses in the New Testament.

This is true, moreover, not only of the Church of the first generation, but also of the entire first two centuries of its existence. At a very early time indeed the rise of gnostic sects and the Montanist separatists called forth a certain theological reflection concerning the Church, particularly concerning its unity and its authority, but Augustine at the end of the fourth century was the first to formulate a real theological argument and definition of the Church. This was at a time when the Church was no longer a struggling minority but a peaceful majority, when it no longer ranged itself over against an unbelieving "world" but more and more was identified with the to-

1 This article, written especially for Theology Today, was translated by Bruce M. Metzger.
tality of all people in the Roman Empire. In this era the Church was far from presenting an unmistakable appearance, standing out by contrast against the background of an unbelieving world. It presented now only the more or less abstract appearance of all men enmeshed in the commonality of life. It was then that Augustine found it necessary to formulate the concept of “the invisible Church,” which at a much later time proved to be so perilous. But even Augustine’s concept of the Church was nothing more than an interlude. An entirely different understanding of the Church became normative for the next one thousand years; it was the Roman Catholic Church of priests and the Pope, in which a holy canon law and a centrally organized authority of jurisdiction defined more and more closely the nature and concept of the Church. But not even then was there formulated a normative and dogmatic theory concerning the Church.

Such a doctrine was formulated first at the time of the Reformation. When the Roman Church with its pretension to exclusive authority set itself in opposition to the knowledge of the Gospel, so lately recovered by the Reformers, the latter realized that they were compelled to resist all papal pretension to authority, for they had derived from nothing less than the New Testament the true, original concept of the Church. Not because of theological zeal, but by reason of bitter necessity, they were the first who set about defining the nature of the Church and constructing a doctrine of the Church based upon the witness of Biblical revelation. Indeed, this doctrine of the Church was a significant part of that which is called the Reformation. We can never be too grateful to the Reformers for their ecclesiastical achievement. Our gratitude, however, would turn into a false, anti-reformation principle of authority and tradition if we should regard the work of the Reformers as closed and their formulation as “irreformable.” We must never forget that their knowledge was gained and defined through an historical situation—through, that is, their struggle against Roman error. Instead of constantly reiterating the formulas of the Reformers, we must think through afresh the nature of the Church as it is revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures.

II

In the New Testament the Church is never an “institution,” a “something,” but it is simply “the people of God,” the true Israel. The Church is a community of people whose foundation is the recon-
The work of Jesus Christ and whose life is the presence of the resurrected Lord through the Holy Spirit. The Church is the body of which Jesus Christ is the head. It is a reality composed of personal relationships. It is the new life which originates through the Spirit of Jesus Christ among men—a life which can only be hinted at by such words as faith, love, hope, justification, regeneration, and communion in Christ, but which can never be expressed exhaustively. *Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia* ("Where Christ is, there is the Church"). This Church, in short, is the fellowship of men who have been renewed through Christ and are united with their Lord.

In the Church we find a unity involving two principles which are entirely separate from each other: truth and fellowship. Apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, "truth" is abstract, impersonal, a "something" concerning which one speaks using the word "it." Jesus Christ however says: "I am the truth." The truth has come to us in him, because God, who is truth, has come to us in him. Therefore Jesus Christ is the answer to the problem of fellowship, the social problem. For where he is, there true fellowship emerges. No fellowship exists apart from him, for he is not only the revelation of truth, but he is also the self-communication of love, that love which is God himself. Therefore, where Jesus Christ is, there is fellowship. The element of fellowship is as essential as the element of truth; indeed, both are nothing less than the love of God in Jesus Christ. As this truth, this Logos (Word), is an abstract idea of truth but is the Son who came to us in the flesh as a man, so this fellowship is not a human federation, not a social institution, but is a personal fellowship in a twofold sense: fellowship with the Father through the Son, and fellowship thereby with men as brethren. Just as this truth of revelation is *sui generis* and cannot be comprehended within any philosophical concept, so this fellowship is also *sui generis* and cannot be comprehended within any sociological concept. It is a fellowship of newly formed human beings, those born again through Jesus Christ.

III

Very soon, however, this Church of Christ developed into something quite different. When the truth of the resurrection was no longer understood in a personal way but as a revealed doctrine, then fellowship was likewise no longer understood personally but as an in-
stitution. Truth is now regarded as dogma, and to believe means to hold dogma as true. The Church moreover, is first of all a priesthood, which keeps the blessing of salvation, based on Christ, and dispenses it through the sacraments. The communio sanctorum is no longer understood personally as a communio of those who are sancti, but essentially as a participatio in the sancta, that is, in holy things and possessions. Henceforward the Church is comprised of a part which dispenses and a part which receives, the priesthood and the laity; and fellowship is no longer the essence of the Church. Yet there remained in the Church of the first thousand years a recollection that the Church is essentially the people of God and that the revelation in Christ was granted to this people of God. Only with the rise of the new Roman Catholicism at the beginning of the eleventh century did the separation into a dispensing and a receiving Church become definitive. Then the real Church was conceived of as an institution embracing the authority of priests, bishops, and Popes, and as a teaching Church which dispenses and secures salvation for individuals.

The Reformation was basically a protest against this institutionalized Church which had grievously erred from the New Testament concept of revelation, truth, and Church. Luther was the first to discover again that the original meaning of revelation and salvation is the coming of God personally to us in Jesus Christ, involving a personal encounter in faith. Luther likewise discovered the import of personal fellowship involved in the Church, that is, a fellowship grounded in Christ. There are actually no objective means of salvation which are imparted in the sacraments; there is actually no holy canon law through which the dispensing and receiving Church is divided from one another as priests and laity; there is actually no Church which is an institution of salvation. There is only a Church which is nothing other than the fellowship of those bound together into one body through Jesus Christ, each member of which is fundamentally a priest who receives and dispenses.

Although the rediscovery of the Gospel by the Reformers was a great achievement, yet they were not able to banish entirely the Roman Catholic leaven. On the other hand, in their purifying of the Church the Reformers swept out much which, though then in a perverted form, had derived from the original nature of the Church. They were unable to rid themselves of the representation of the Church as an institution. In their teaching the Reformers success-
fully overcame such an impersonal concept, but in the practical life of the Church and in what may be called the instinctive view of the Church, this idea has persisted even to the present. For the average Protestant, the Church is a "something," an institution, an organization, a corporation similar to the state or to a federation, provided with fixed laws and organs. Even though one abstractly formulates the Church quite differently as regards theology, still in one's practical thinking one always relapses into this institutional idea. Thus it happens that if one speaks of what "the Church" does or says, or of what it ought to do or say, one always falls into the error of thinking of what this corporation does or says through its "organs," through, for example, its pastors, its synods, and so forth.

This relapse into an impersonal and institutional way of thinking is most deeply rooted in the Roman Catholic misunderstanding of the nature of saving truth; namely, that truth is dogma and faith is assent to dogma, or—which is no better—that truth is the revealed teaching of the Bible and faith is assent to this revealed truth in the Bible. The corollary of this false understanding of truth is the fact that as a rule the Protestant Church is as little a real fellowship as the Roman Catholic. The intellectualistic, impersonal understanding of truth leads to an intellectualistic concept of faith. How contrary to the New Testament all this is! In the New Testament, it need scarcely be mentioned, faith is identical with life in the love of God. But through this orthodoxy of quid pro quo, faith and love are separated, just as truth and fellowship are separated. As truth, conceived of as a doctrine, is impersonal, so the Church, conceived of as an organization or institution, is also impersonal. The Churches which have emerged from the Reformation lack almost entirely this element of a truly vital fellowship in Christ.

All this has resulted in a most unfortunate consequence. In their struggle against a false visibility of the Church, the Reformers—at least Zwingli and Calvin—taught the doctrine of the "invisible" Church. By this was meant a Church which is not only a fellowship, but is also an "invisible fellowship of faith." The chief emphasis was that all members profess belief in one faith. Whether they lived as brethren, and whether their worship and their daily life bore the imprint of a fellowship formed by Christ, was not frequently questioned. Since both the principal definitions of the Church, coetus fidelium and numerus praedestinatorum, bear a quite
individualistic stamp, the reproach from Roman Catholicism, that Protestantism is stark individualism, is not entirely unjustified. It is no longer properly understood that the Church is, first of all, a living fellowship which not only proceeds out of union with Christ, but also leads to Christ. In place of the mater ecclesia, within which alone one can be united with Christ, there emerges a conception of an ecclesiastical association, which arises by reason of a federation of individual believers.

IV

All these deformities which have emerged in the history of the Church down to the present day will doubtless become all the more conspicuous as we now pass on to investigate the separate characteristics of the Church’s nature as they are enumerated in the creed: “I believe in one holy catholic Church.”¹

1. The Church of Jesus Christ, as regards its nature, is one. Jesus Christ, who is the head of his fellowship, has only one body. Since the Church is the fellowship of life, which is begotten by Jesus Christ, it can be only one. Now, however, there are, as a matter of fact, many “Churches.” In the organization of independent ecclesiastical bodies, multiplicity can be a serious danger to the unity of the Church and can become a scandal; and it is so today, but it must not be so. The unity of the Church does not necessarily mean a unity of ecclesiastical organization and government. To suppose that this aspect belongs of necessity to the unity of the Church is the consequence of confusing the people of God with an ecclesiastical institution, a confusion which is typical of the Roman conception of the Church and which has come to prevail also in Protestant “Churches.” Neither the limiting of a Church by territorial boundaries, nor the variety of ecclesiastical and cultic forms, involves, in itself, a destruction of or even a peril to the Church. Unity is not uniformity. Again, even the coexistence of different ecclesiastical bodies in one and the same place is not in itself an evil, if only these different ecclesiastical bodies are joined with one another by the bond of brotherly love, by mutual recognition as Churches, and by readiness to work with one another. Since the temperaments of various people differ so widely, it is quite in order that they should arrange their

¹ The author refers to the original form of the Nicene Creed; see below at VI. 4.—Translator.
worship and their devotional activity in different ways. In the future we must not strive for a greater uniformity but, on the contrary, for an even greater differentiation. What the Salvation Army, with its own extraordinary structure as an army, can accomplish for Christ, that the Church of England, with its directly opposite structure, cannot accomplish. The ‘Army of Jesus Christ’ requires many kinds of ‘weapons’ and must be quite flexible in its operations. Here we must definitely discard the ideas of ecclesiastical unity which have descended from the time of the Reformation, since they are all closely orientated to the Roman Catholic idea of the Church.

But we must take still another step. The diversity of creeds is far from implying a lack of unity. The theology of Matthew is not that of Paul, and the theology of Paul is not that of John. Witness to the salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ is the basis of the Church and witness to his resurrection is the Church’s life; yet neither witness implies an identity of theological interpretation. On the other hand it is only this diversity of the truth of revelation and doctrine which results in the furtherance of the absolute unity of the Churches’ creeds. There is no scandal in the fact that Lutherans and Calvinists do not have precisely the same understanding of the Lord’s Supper. The scandal, however, is that they therefore cannot celebrate the communion with each other; which indeed amounts to this, that they do not acknowledge each other to be the Church. The cause for the division is not the diversity of the creeds but a sectarian, overweening pride and desire for special recognition. As long as the creed expresses the fact that the Church is a living fellowship which is grounded in the redemption secured by Jesus Christ, more precise theological explications of the truth of revelation and the nature of the Church may be quite diversified. As long as and whenever Christians can recognize one another as brethren in Christ, the unity of the Church is assured; and when this is the case, their unity is displayed in a willingness to assist one another in the work of the Church. We must learn that no one of the existing Churches possesses all the truth, nor has it developed satisfactorily all its necessary functions. The mutual readiness to learn from one another is a far more significant manifestation of unity than the struggle after unity of organization and Church order, just as the mutual readiness to learn theologically from one another is more significant than the settlement of differences between confessions. So far as the ecumenical
movement recognizes this and strives more and more closely to approximate it, to that extent is the movement on the right track in understanding what constitutes the unity of the Church. The Roman unity, however, is the product of a truly anti-Christian coercion, and it is only by this coercion that it maintains itself. In a world which is striving after national totalitarianism in the political field, the Church can become an illusory ideal which the world may regard with admiration and secret envy; but all such totalitarianism in the Church is the opposite of true unity and is, in fact, nothing less than a betrayal of Christ.

V

2. "One holy catholic Church." The Church is holy (heilig) because it is the fellowship of saints (Heiligen). The Church is holy through him who makes it holy (heiligt). To be holy is the same thing as to be the property of Jesus Christ and to be the vessel of his Holy Spirit. There is a twofold misunderstanding of holiness, namely, the cultic, objectivistic error and the moral, subjectivistic error. The cultic objectivistic variety, which has thoroughly infected the Roman Catholic Church, consists in the identification of holiness with material objects. It comes to its crassest expression in the dogma of transubstantiation. The bread is turned into the body of Christ. Less crass, but quite as perilous, is the identification of the authority of Christ with the authority of the Pope, or the identification of the full power of Christ with the magical power of the priest, who, by means of a formula, turns the bread into the body of Christ. Here the holiness of Christ is a thing and it is tied to a human act or manipulation. The numinous is localized.

In all these examples of terrible misconstruing of true holiness, a remnant of holiness still remains which awakens religious awe because it points to the presence of the holy God. In subjectivistic moralism, however, this feeling of the Wholly Other, the presence of the Holy One who comes from the other side, either vanishes altogether or is almost entirely obliterated. Here holiness is understood only in terms of morality. The Church is holy because it is comprised of people who obey the law of Christ and who indicate by their manner of living that they are holy. If the former is the characteristic error of Roman Catholicism, the latter has infected Protestantism. The Protestant Church of the present suffers from nothing
so much as moralism. The true holiness of the Church, however, is this, that it lives only by the free grace of God in Jesus Christ and seeks its holiness only in him.

Separation from the world is bound up with holiness. The question, however, is how the Church should separate itself from the world. True holiness consists in exclusive obedience to Christ. The distinguishing mark of the sect is that the line of demarcation between the Christian and the world is placed in something which is certainly neither Christ nor comes from Christ. Measured by this standard, the Roman Catholic Church is the sect par excellence. For it maintains that obedience to itself, to its dogma, to its ecclesiastical structure, is that which divides the world from the Church; extra ecclesiam [Romanam], nulla salus. Pope Boniface VIII declared, "Subjection to the Pope is indispensable to salvation." But likewise the Churches which have sprung from the Reformation have not rid themselves entirely of this sectarian concept of holiness, and several of them ape the Roman Church by saying: extra ecclesiam [nostram], nulla salus. The insensitivity and self-righteousness of such Churches is what makes ecumenical cooperation so difficult.

This false distinction, however, is not the only evil. Equally erroneous is a lack of all distinction whatever—in a word, worldliness. It flourishes upon the decay of the consciousness of holiness. When this obtains the Church is transformed into an ethical culture school, its message of proclamation into moralistic or social instruction, its divine worship into a kind of theatrical or concert-like performance with a religious veneer, and it understands itself as a sort of association for the cultivation of the ethical and religious life. It is a sorry state when the Church is falsely supernatural; it is a still sorrier state when it no longer even recognizes its own supernaturalness.

It is the paradox of true holiness that it is at once full-orbed supernaturalism and a genuine humanity; in other words, that it is the supernaturalism of the holy love of God. This love has been fully revealed and has completely drawn nigh in Jesus Christ alone, and it is found only by him who believes in the miracle of the reconciliation on the Cross. Where it is laid hold of in faith, there it produces that love which expresses itself without ostentation in everyday matters (see the parable of the Last Judgment, Matthew 25: 31–46). As this
love is fellowship, and produces fellowship, so it originates in fellowship.

The lack of fellowship is therefore a symptom of the lack of holiness. The Church has failed miserably not simply by showing so little interest in the social problems of the present day; it has failed even more abjectly in that it has not, by its very existence, been a solution of these problems. It is accorded so little respect because it has manifested so little of its supernaturalness through its fellowship. The world no longer believes the Church’s word, because this word lacks power to produce fellowship and because this word does not proceed from a real fellowship.

VI

3. "One holy Catholic Church." The nature of the Church is absolutely personal and absolutely universal. It is the second because it is the first. Only the absolutely personal can be truly universal; it is only the love of God revealed in Christ which can be understood by all and which has to do with everyone. Jesus Christ alone has the right to be totalitarian. He lays claim to everything and everybody. And he proves his right to totalitarianism by exercising his sovereign authority in setting us free. Indeed, his authority is known and can be known only in freedom.

The Church has obscured its innate universalism—its value for all peoples, races, and classes—by substituting a certain kind of respectability for the truth of Christ and the life of Christ. Missionaries have created unnecessary difficulties because they have wished to force European and American characteristics of the Church upon people of other races and other cultures. A Chinese was not created by God to become a Presbyterian but to become a possession of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is universal; Calvinistic theology is not, though it is admirable as a theological exposition of the truth of Christ in terms of the tradition of European culture. All theology, even the best, is only partial knowledge and needs therefore a constant review. The rigidity of theological doctrines has worked a decided detriment to the universality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The realization of the Church’s universality has been hampered most of all by the Church’s lack of strength and wisdom in missionary work. No longer does the Church have power to speak effectively to spiritually-minded men of our century, and it has just as little in-
fluence with the newly formed "fourth estate," the industrial workers. In a spiritual as well as in a sociological sense, it has become a middle-class institution because it has not expressed Christian fellowship in its own existence, but only a common bourgeois life. In short, the universality of the Gospel cannot fully manifest itself because of the sectarian spirit of the several ecclesiastical groups and confessions. It is not the multiplicity of Churches in itself, but the fights among these Churches; and it is not the diversity of doctrine and form in itself, but the lack of a common testimony to Christ, which has compromised the esteem of the Church in the world and has barred its approach to peoples, races, and classes.

Notwithstanding all this: the miracle of Pentecost occurred and does occur again and again, so that the Gospel is not only proclaimed in all tongues, but people also recognize and believe that the Church is a truly Christian fellowship involving a common life of brotherhood, embracing both the most primitive tribes of the South Seas as well as the cultured citizens of the East. By this same Pentecostal miracle the Bible has not only been translated into hundreds of languages, but it is read in these languages and effects the miracle of conversion, so that today both recipients of the Nobel Prize and illiterate peasants repeat the same Lord's Prayer. In spite of all its lamentable failures, the Church is universal.

4. The characteristic of apostolicity is a later addition to the creed which is not recognized by the Church universal. We mention it here because it is true. The Church is apostolic and should be apostolic. It is apostolic because it is founded upon the Apostles' testimony to Christ. It should be apostolic because the testimony of the Apostles, which is preserved in the New Testament, is the norm of its preaching and of its understanding of itself. Only in the New Testament can we learn authoritatively what the Church is and what it should be. But the word "apostolic" can also be understood in a false sense, referring to the establishment of a false principle of tradition and the establishment of a false authority of the Church. There are Churches which lay exclusive weight upon "apostolic succession." If nothing more were meant by this than that all preaching of the revealed truth of God and every true aspect of the Church go back to the Apostles, one could not think highly enough of apostolic succession. In this sense everything that belongs at present to the genuine Church of Christ stands in apostolic succession.
Unfortunately, however, this is not what is meant by the term. Rather, this expression is understood as signifying a principle of Church law, namely, the legitimacy of the ordination of bishops, who go back in unbroken succession to the Apostles. This high estimate of a principle of Church law is not only quite questionable in itself but is absolutely foreign to the New Testament. It rests ultimately upon that false concept of an institutional Church, which the development of the Church brought into a wrong perspective.

Even more perilous and in striking opposition to the meaning of the New Testament is the pretension to authority which the Roman hierarchy and Pope have founded upon the principle of apostolicity. Through it the *codex juris canonici* was placed in the stead of the revelation of Christ, and the working of the Holy Spirit was subordinated to canon law. Thus the Church as fellowship was not only superseded by the Church as an institution, but even the truth of revelation itself was made subservient to the authority of the highest officials of the institution. Consequently the Church became a supernatural, totalitarian state, which was and will be the model of all political totalitarianisms.

VII

Where is the true Church? In the time of the Reformation this question led to the formulation of the "marks" (*notae*) of the true Church, namely, purity of doctrine and the right administration of the Sacraments. Even if by "doctrine" we understood the preaching of the Gospel, the first part of this formula is not without difficulty. Certainly the Church, the true Church, is present where the Word of the living God in Jesus Christ is spoken to men and is received by them with a living faith. But the Word of the living God is not simply identical with preaching or indeed with theological teaching and Christian literature. *Not everywhere* where good "Biblical" words are preached, taught, or written, does God speak; and *not only* when the Church makes, so to speak, an "official" speech, does God speak. The perplexity in which the Church’s "evangelization" finds itself almost everywhere today, plainly lies in thus incorrectly identifying the Word of God with "the preaching of the Gospel." God's speaking neither *binds* itself to such direct Biblical instruction nor is the presence of God’s Spirit guaranteed thereby. God can proceed in entirely different ways to speak *his* Word to men and to build *his*
Church, and indeed it seems that in our time all the customary ways of “preaching” have become more or less ineffectual. Today this traditional joining of God’s Word and preaching appears to be justified neither for the missionary and the evangelistic activity of the Church—its spread—nor for the task of the spiritual nourishment and strengthening of existing Christian communities. Missionary effort must learn to proceed via many “indirect” ways, and the edification of the congregation as a fellowship in Christ requires entirely different means from those usually employed since the time of the Reformation.

A true faith, and thus a true Church, will never arise unless God speaks his Word. But we must learn afresh how God wishes to speak his Word and to free us from all traditional prejudices.

Concerning the second “mark” of the true Church, the right administration of the sacraments, it is necessary first of all to make several critical observations. Not only does the word “sacrament” never appear in the New Testament, but even the idea, as a leading idea of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, is lacking as well. At no point of the Church’s doctrine did the Reformation make so little impact upon the false development of the Middle Ages as right here. Let us not forget; it was at this point that the false concept of the Church intruded, namely, the contention that the priesthood dispenses the blessing of salvation through the sacrament. It is precisely here that the misunderstanding of the Church as an institution always emerges. And yet baptism and the Lord’s Supper must be understood in the fullest sense as the expressions and the means of personal truth and fellowship. Both involve fellowship with Christ and fellowship with the “saints.” As was indicated above, the communio sanctorum came to be understood at an early date in an objective rather than a personal sense, as a participation in holy things (sancta) rather than a fellowship of holy people (sancti), and consequently the “sacraments” were understood as holy things (sancta), objective means of salvation. It is here that a great problem confronts theology, a problem almost totally neglected, namely, how to understand baptism and the Lord’s Supper in a personal and non-institutional sense, as the means of that kind of communion with Christ which involves at the same time a true brotherhood expressed in everyday life.
At a time when world politics are developing in terrifying proportions into national totalitarianism or into compulsory collectivism, the Church should make certain that it ponders well the significance of that fellowship which embraced the entire life of the primitive Church immediately after Pentecost. The Word of God was mighty in those days. It proved its might in just this, that it created true fellowship, not simply fellowship enjoyed in divine worship—although this was present to a degree we can scarcely realize—but fellowship in everyday affairs. As long as the Church cannot furnish an example of genuine, day-by-day fellowship, its word will fall, more and more, on deaf ears. It is necessary, therefore, to be exceedingly attentive whenever a new and genuine fellowship among Christians manifests itself and to take seriously such manifestations, being careful not to suppress them with concepts hallowed by tradition. In this sense the present essay is only a beginning of a new understanding of the nature of the Church, and it must in no wise be regarded as the last word on the subject.