

The visible church

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Revue internationale de théologie = Internationale theologische Zeitschrift = International theological review**

Band (Jahr): **8 (1900)**

Heft 30

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403477>

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THE VISIBLE CHURCH.

There is perhaps no term in human speech that calls for more careful definition than the word "Church" does, and to agree that we shall use it as limited in the expression "Christ's visible Church" is so far from satisfying the need that it only brings us face to face with its acutest form.

For granted even that there were no difference of opinion as to what Christ's Church, Christ's visible Church on earth, ought to be, yet there remains inevitably room for a great deal of difference as to the application of the name to the concrete. Not even he, whose own use in this matter is the most distinct and confident, will pretend that what to him is *the* Church is free from all spot and wrinkle. And what is this but the confession that certain notes of perfection are absent or marred? That he has assumed that if some few, or possibly if some one condition be fulfilled, then the necessary and sufficient justification of the name of the Church has been earned? The root of perfection may indeed be one, but its manifestation is complex, and when we are dealing with the actual we find one part here and another part there, more here and less there, but perfection herself nowhere, and according to that note of perfection which is uppermost in a man's mind he will draw the line among his fellows that separates those within from those without the pale of the Church. Hence also, unless he carefully define what he is doing, great confusion will arise between him and those with whom he speaks, and this all the more since certain of the notes of the Church's perfection are essentially spiritual and so their presence or their absence in any given case is beyond our powers of certain discernment.

It is the aim of this paper to discuss whether there be any practical definition by which a visible Church may be so

clearly discerned that in all the confusion of the present day it may profitably be termed by an excellency *the Church*.

Conceivably there may be several tests or notes of perfection each capable of supplying a definition such as we seek for, and clearly the nature of the excellency of the Church defined will depend upon the nature of the definition. Hence we must be very careful always to keep clearly in view the foundations of our own definition, should we arrive at one, so that when we speak of the Church we may not attribute to it properties or limitations which do not flow necessarily from the ground of our definition, and belong properly to some other note of perfection not wholly present among those persons who are within the pale as we have placed it. It is to be remarked however that this is due to our imperfections, and that many definitions, which now must be carefully scrutinised and distinguished, might in a better state of matters be used indiscriminately.

To the Romanist, I suppose, our problem would be an easy one; he would tell us that the Church consists of those who are in communion with the Pope of Rome; that no other definition is desirable or even possible, or if there be indeed another it would include exactly the same persons without diminution or addition as the one just given does. But to be really useful a definition must correspond to and grow out of some central and important feature of the Church as it should be, and that this is the case with the one before us will not be maintained by any one likely to read these lines. It would indeed be fulfilled by the perfect Church, but so would ten thousand others of essentially equal weight, and it would therefore in no case be profitable even for the mere convenience of dialectics, and in actual circumstances it is positively misleading. We therefore dismiss it without further comment.

Addressing ourselves to our task let us come closer to the term "Church" and narrow the field in which to look for our definition. It has in ordinary speech three standard senses to one or other of which any given use may be more or less accurately referred, namely

(1) All those who are spiritually united with God through Jesus Christ;

(2) All who have been baptised into the name of Christ;

(3) An organised body of the baptised.

In the first of these senses there is only one Church, and no one will deny that the definition rests upon a most central and important note of perfection. But it is one undiscernible to human faculty, at least with sufficient distinctness to justify so much as the attempt to apply it to one's fellowmen as the criterion by which to divide them into two recognisably separate classes; and this of inmost necessity, for union with God is a spiritual thing, invisible in itself even though it bear visible fruit, and it is moreover a thing capable of degree, the union of no mortal man with Christ being perfect, and no one perhaps being absolutely alien from Him.

In spite then of the transcendent excellency by which the Church, as defined in this manner, would be distinguished, and useful for many purposes as it may be so to define it, we must acknowledge that we shall find no help in this way towards the discernment of the *visible* Church. The failure to realise this is the fallacy that lies at the root of a great deal of the ecclesiastical confusion of the present day. Thus the Rev^d Newman Hall L. L. D. (*Congregationalism for Christ*, Snow & Co., Paternoster Row) not only insists strongly upon the note of faith as necessary for the being of the Church, quoting our own XIXth article "The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men", but goes on to apply it directly as the test of the value or non-value of various Church polities, condemning as worthless those that admit people to membership who are Christians only so far as they can be made so "by accident of birth, by outward ceremonies, or by Act of Parliament"; and he fails to realise that if such as have just been enumerated are properly excluded from membership in the Church, so are all they also who are Christians by profession only; that in fact any attempt to frame a visible Church directly upon a spiritual definition must end in failure, however near at first sight in the days of fervent enthusiasm success may seem to be. For if he does not accept outward profession as qualifying for membership in the congregation, i. e. the visible Church, what does he accept? He has repudiated outward ceremonies, that is baptism. Let him then take outward profession as the ground of his definition, and let him justify it as he will, but do not let him imagine that he has arrived at a discernible congregation of faithful men. But if on the other

hand he realises that profession is as much an outward ceremony as baptism, and so comes under the same condemnation, then let him admit that his view forbids to call by the name of the Church any discernible body of men at all.

As to our article we must not separate the quoted portion from the rest of it, and we shall see that in attributing faithfulness to the visible Church, it is describing it in its intention and as it ought to be rather than offering any further criterion for its discernment than perhaps its profession of an orthodox creed. Or if any one insist upon faith, real spiritual faith, as an essential note of the working definition, all that can be said is that this reduces it to futility, and that the visible Church of the article, if any coherence at all remained in its language, would be visible, not *qua* Church, but merely because its members were still clothed in gross mortal bodies; we could see them if they stood before us, but whether or no they were really members of the Church we could in no wise tell.

We must hold to the position above stated, that any attempt to discern a visible Church by a spiritual criterion is absolutely and essentially doomed to failure, and the more frankly we recognise this the less likely we shall be to do mischief with confused and fallacious language. We recognise, nay we maintain that in devotional and hortatory occasions we may speak of the Church as she ought to be, and we may apply her glorious name to all those whom God can recognise as his own even though we cannot, but we maintain also the propriety and utility of our present endeavour, if only because Christ Himself visibly chose out a definite company among whom, be it remembered, was an Iscariot; if only because Christ Himself did not hesitate to speak of the Kingdom of God as containing both good and bad. Let us then take up the second standard sense, that which defines the Church as consisting of the baptised.

Here also we have but one Church, and this, apart from accidental hindrances, of limits quite ascertainable, for the question whether or no a man has been baptised is a question of external fact on which we are quite competent to decide. And when we remember that baptism is of Christ's own appointment as the entrance into the number of His disciples, we shall readily admit both that no man who is unbaptised may

be reckoned as a member of Christ's visible Church, and also that every man who is baptised may be so reckoned.

But to remain here would be to abandon our endeavour, for by the word Church we understand an organic unity, and looking abroad upon the baptised throughout the world we see them to be scattered and separated from each other even in such a matter as the Communion of Body and Blood of their Lord, nor is there in baptism itself any element of corporate organisation. Hence we are bidden, both by the nature and by the patent facts of the case, not to be content with baptism as the sole defining element of the Church, even while we accept it as such for the membership of the individual.

In other words we must for our note of excellency pass on to the third of the senses given above and seek it in the domain of organisation. In doing this we shall be dealing with matters which at least in their first aspect lie within the sphere of ordinary human action, and as such we shall regard them. As to any deeper range which they may have in their nature and consequences it will not be necessary to concern ourselves; and even those persons, who believe that most momentous spiritual issues depend *directly* upon the external form of certain points, may find some profit in regarding the Church as a society organised according to the analogy of ordinary methods and principles.

Meanwhile it is to be noted that whatever further definition we arrive at we shall not find any organisation which receives the allegiance of all the baptised, but while this is evidence of our sad defection from the ideal of the Church it need not cause us any intellectual difficulty. Let us frankly and sorrowfully recognise its true cause, and then, while there will still be room for difference of opinion as to the proper terms in which to describe those baptised persons who do not yield their allegiance to that organised society which we find to be the Church, we shall not I think be driven either into that extreme view which would refuse the name of baptism to any ceremony performed outside that organisation the excellency of which we acknowledge, or into that other extreme which will recognise no such excellency at all.

To proceed then, there are two grounds on either of which a Church might claim pre-eminence of organisation, intrinsic

merit and Apostolic institution. Of these the former may be passed over, not as unimportant, but because it will be readily admitted that if the Apostles added this to their teaching that they founded an organised society, and more especially if this were done by Christ's direction, then *cæteris paribus* of two Churches that which could claim to be by external organisation one with the Apostolic foundation would clearly carry the pre-eminency; moreover this identity itself would on any view form such a large element in the adaptation of a Church to effect its end, that we should at least be obliged to look into it as a preliminary to deciding properly the question of intrinsic merit.

That the Apostles did found a society, or rather that they were themselves an infant society founded by Christ, calls for no proof in these pages, but we may recall that the germ of its organisation lay in the commission which they, and they only, had received from Christ, and in the recognition of this by the mass of the believers. Let us then discuss this question of Apostolicity.

A clear distinction must be made between what may be called organic, and what mechanical identity with the Apostolic foundation, and an example may be taken from common life to illustrate the point. A cycling club for the practice and general encouragement of the sport is started with a given constitution and code of rules, which however by competent resolution or even by use and wont undergo great change; a second club is then formed with constitution and rules identically the same as those originally adopted by the first; then while the second club may be called mechanically the same as the original foundation, this on its part has been organically one with itself all along.

The leading ideas of the Church being union with a Personal Head and Founder, and the transmission of a Paratheke committed by Him to its keeping, we are pointed to organic continuity as the thing to be sought for; and indeed we have no choice, for mechanical identity, even were it desirable, has long ago become impossible through change of circumstances and through our great ignorance as to the detail of primitive arrangements. There is also another leading idea of the Church, namely the practice of a godly, righteous, and sober life through

the presence of the Holy Spirit in each member, but though this alone would not point us very distinctly towards organic identity with the Apostolic Church, it certainly does not point us away from it; what it does suggest is that there should be some outward rite for the individual, expressive of his entrance into this new life, when he joins the society, and, if you will, some corporate action by the society expressive of the brotherhood of its members, and of the continued dependence upon God of each for his spiritual food. But these things are the *functions* of the Church, and we are dealing with a previous question, the *nature of its organisation*.

Organic identity, then, of organisation with the Apostolic foundation must be our test of pre-eminence; and this in its turn will be found to centre in and to depend upon the Apostolic Succession, by which we mean that continuity of ordination by which the ministerial commission is derived in part at least from the Apostles and so contains an element independent of any authority inherent necessarily in the people.

Apostolic Succession as thus defined is a thing entirely according to the analogy of common human action.

We could imagine the cycling club spoken of above to have sprung out of the enthusiasm of one man, who had perfected a system of riding, had publicly taught it, and specially commissioned certain of his disciples to continue his instructions and carry them far and wide, and that finally the club had formed itself round these men to whom naturally great official deference would be shown and who also might agreeably with their own instructor's wish, give their formal sanction to those whom they considered to be fit for their own responsibilities, admitting some as capable of teaching and some as capable also of appointing teachers.

Here there is nothing that supersedes, much less that outrages, the ordinary principles of human action, and here at the same time is a close parallel to the Apostolic Succession in the Church as defined above. Further it is clear no cycling club that did not possess a body of teachers holding a sanction that had been transmitted from the original founder could claim any organic unity with the original club comparable with that possessed by a club that did possess such a body of teachers. For not only would this sanction in itself form a

unique and powerful connection, but it would carry with it also the whole weight due to its recognition by all the original members, who had therein found a centre of union. Similarly, yet not merely equally but rather *a fortiori* in proportion to the greater personal honour we owe to our Founder, the Apostolic Succession is the most important element of organisation in the organic identity of any Church with the Apostolic foundation. And as there is none that can be compared with it, so also there is none that can be added to it as a necessary condition.

If indeed we were to consider that the Apostles, besides instituting a ministry by transferring to other men all that was permanent in their own commission, had laid down for all time certain fixed constitutional forms, we might take these points of mechanical identity, and add them on as conditions for the excellency of organisation that we are seeking; and some may hold that this is the case with the threefold form of the ministry.

It is however of the less moment, seeing that those who have held by the Apostolic Succession have also always held by the threefold ministry. Only let it be said that the view unhesitatingly adopted here is that the Apostles laid upon us no absolute fixity of form at all, but left the Church with perfect freedom to adapt all her outward forms to the needs of successive ages as they might arise. In any case the Succession itself is capable of embodiment in any form of polity, and the Apostles might, as far as any inherent disability is concerned, have entrusted the function of transmitting their sanction to all the believers as a corporate whole, or to each individually, or to many, as well as, what in actual fact they did, to a few only.

Had they entrusted it to all as a corporate body we should have had a society constituted in all respects like one formed and carried on by men meeting as equals, and appointing officials purely at their own will, and the whole sanction of the ministry would come through the popular voice. But it would be precisely that part of the sanction which came down from the Apostles and not that part which would lie in the inherent, essentially inalienable authority of the people alive at any given moment that would form the strongest link of the con-

stitution with itself in former ages. In fact what is it that constitutes the continuity of any ordinary club, if it be not the reception by each age of the sanction of the past?

So then, the very centre and strength of this sanction lying in the Apostolic Succession, we hesitate no longer in saying that as regards organisation it is not only a necessary but the sufficient condition for the identity of a Church with the apostolic foundation. That is, it is the necessary and sufficient condition for earning by an excellency the name of the Church according to the principles already laid down.

Yet there remain a few things to be said.

To prove that there is in fact such a thing in existence as the Apostolic Succession, is outside the scope of the present paper, but it is important to note that the question is a purely historical one. As with baptism so with it, it is quite within the sphere of human intelligence, and apart from accidental hindrances its presence or absence in any case may be determined. Again it is not necessary to map out with clear definition all the functions for the performance of which the Apostles gave commission, and to decide for example how far in the Holy Eucharist the priest is acting as the representative of the Apostles and how far directly of the people round about him. The chief thing to note is that there is in fact an apostolic commission, and that it is transmissible only by those who have apostolic authority for so doing.

In this connection it may be well to notice more explicitly that the people receiving the apostolic message will naturally receive with it the apostolic messenger and make him their own representative in all such acts as are proper to them as a society of believers in the message. How far they are, and at the beginning were bound to such a course by the nature of the case, how far they were induced thereto by apostolic direction, and how far it was a purely voluntary act of expediency it might be interesting to discuss, but it would not be relevant to our present purpose, which is satisfied with perceiving that be the actual ministerial sanction as complex a whole as may be, there is present in it, at least as one element, an apostolic authority distinct from anything bestowed upon it by or through the people in general.

As to the divine call of the individual priests, that bears the same relation to their formal ordination, as their living faith does to their baptism; and as in the one case so in the other we shall come to grief if we try to take an invisible spiritual reality as the criterion of the being of a visible Church. Prophets indeed our priests ought to be, but as no man can read another's heart, so all that we can effect is that they shall be fully entrusted with the message of God so far as Christ's incarnation has brought it within reach of man's criteria. And how better shall this message be preserved and handed on than by a society formed on and grouped round the Apostolic Succession?

Again the ceremony of transmission, the form of the ordination service, is immaterial in itself. Of course if Christ or the Apostles had laid down that none could represent them who had not been ordained in a particular way, then indeed as no man's sanction can be conveyed against his own authority, there would be absolute necessity of adhering rigidly to the fixed form. But who will maintain for a moment that they did any such thing? On the other hand as to a very great extent apostolic *authorship* must be received as an expression of apostolic *authority*, so no ceremony which they used may by us be lightly disregarded. Yet to do so would not invalidate the sanction, those who gave it might be guilty of levity, but they who received it would receive it, and God would not withhold his blessing from the kernel because the husk was injured. Of its own nature a commission may be bestowed by word, by writing, or by symbolic act¹).

Yet a case of irregularity in the form of ordination might be so glaring that the ordained man could call for no recognition from his fellows. Were there no witnesses to attest the fact he would be as far as the visible Church was concerned a layman. Similarly if the ordination were performed in outra-

¹) It is interesting to note that, on the one occasion on which St. Ignatius shows that he does not consider the personal presidency of the bishop to be an absolute necessity in the solemnity of the Eucharist, he does not require in his place a "presbyter", but simply "one to whomsoever he (the bishop) may entrust it" [Sm. VIII. Read the whole passage]. Popes Hadrian II. and John VIII. also claimed that their sanction was sufficient to take the place of ordination (v. Rev. Int., 1897, p. 467).

geous opposition to the laws laid down by the Church, for of necessity the Church as a corporate entity must lay down certain rules of form and order, it would be within the competency of the regular authorities to refuse to recognise it, but this they would have to do either on the ground that the action of the ordainer involved the repudiation of that apostolic authority which he pretended to bestow, or else recognising that it had been bestowed justify their non-recognition of its right to become operative on the general ground of the welfare of the Church.

Here we arrive at the question of schism. How are we to decide between two communities both consisting of baptised persons, both grouped round a ministry tracing its sanction upward to the Apostles? Must we seek for still another note as the necessary property of the visible Church? Is there, per chance, some ever present centre on the earth, by nature within the certain perception of men, through which the apostolic sanction must pass, if it would be valid, ere it radiate throughout the body? History most emphatically answers “*no*”, and reason adds her “*Amen*” with great thankfulness, if only because in that case through man’s frailty the inner life and purpose of the Church would be enslaved and injured by her outward constitution instead of being as at present furthered and fostered; with great thankfulness if only because thereby the reality of the immediate kingship of the living Christ, and the expediency of His absence in the body would be much obscured. But to speak of these matters at length is not for the present occasion. Nor is there any further test at all to add to our definition, and be the correct inferences as to theory and as to practice what they may, we find that there may be several bodies of the baptised, separate in some matters from each other, yet each through its ministry claiming oneness with the apostolic foundation, as each branch of a divided stream might claim oneness with the undivided water, and each therefore as far as our criterion goes equally entitled to the name of the Church. But as the differences between these bodies will lie outside the sphere in which we have sought our definition, or if within it be utterly trivial, so we should call them not separate Churches, but separated portions of the one Church. An imperfect state of matters truly, but we shall not better or alter these things by

refusing to see them; and again we may thank God, as regards their substance, that He has given the Church a bond of unity so elastic, and at the same time so indestructible in itself and so strong in its effects, for the apostolic ministry is a constant exhortation to perfect corporate life and a powerful aid in effecting it. How carefully ought they to persevere it, who have it! For having it there is nothing else apostolic which they cannot either hold or recover for themselves; having lost it, they can never again recover it by a wish.

No word hitherto has been said of heresy, and as the Church must embody her faith in a formal creed, so it is quite within her province to take formal note of heresy. But it seems better to leave our definition as it is, inasmuch as heresy of the worst sort would amount to a repudiation of the message and therefore also of the purpose and authority of the sender, while heresy of less serious moment, whatever disciplinary measures it might call for, would rather earn the title of an erring branch of the Church than be held either in name or in substance utterly to have destroyed its character. But to guide him in his decision between two differing branches of the Church, an impartial outsider has no infallible external test. It is not in the nature of God's dealings with man to subordinate the spiritual and eternal to the outward and transient so utterly as the existence of such a thing would require, and wilfully to imagine that there is one is to shirk the responsibility which God has laid upon us, and to fall into grievous error. An honest mind will find abundance of guidance, but no excuse for sinking into careless sleep; and even if he make a mistake he is not damned thereby. He is a better arithmetician who works out a sum for himself, even if his answer be wrong, than he who copies the right result; and so also it is in spiritual matters.

To sum up what has been done:—Recognising that the Church in the wider and deeper senses of the word is not and cannot be visible as a Church, that is cannot be defined in its membership or exhibit its corporate life, we have sought for an outward note whereby to distinguish a society worthy of being called the visible Church.

Taking baptism as the test for the individual, we were next brought to see that apostolicity of organisation was the

necessary and sufficient mark of the organisation, and that this apostolicity centred in the succession whereby the ministerial commission is derived in part at least from the Apostles independently of any right inherent necessarily in the people. The definition itself is useful and is no new thing: but still more useful, at least to myself, has been the process of thinking and discernment by which the definition has been arrived at, or rather let me say, understood.

Finally be it noted that we have not formulated any theory as to the relationship between the visible Church of our definition and the true Body of Christ, for we know that God seeth not as man seeth, and that many shall come from the East and from the West and shall sit down with Abraham and with Isaac, while the children of the kingdom shall be cast into outer darkness. We have not denied that the Church of apostolic order might be at a given time inferior to some other in apostolic faith and practice, or even that by intolerance and persecution those who held the keys might drive out Christ's sheep to wander in the wilderness. But still with regard to the substance on which the definition has been based, an endeavour has been made to state accurately what the Apostolic Succession is, and to show that with regard to the corporate life of Christians its prerogative is royal; that it seems to be the divinely ordered means whereby they could, if they would, live in the unity of the body; and that it is at least *one* of the divinely ordered methods whereby the historical reality of the resurrection shall be, with other Christian truths, proclaimed in the world and preserved from generation to generation in the living knowledge of men; and lastly, that unless they themselves hinder it, God's blessing will surely attend the Apostles' messengers,—for the Apostles themselves were not self-sent.

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