

Ekklesia

The Nature and Confession of the Church
(Part II of a V)

“The Church’s One Foundation” (Stanza 2) with Scripture Proofs

Elect from ev'ry nation, Yet one o'er all the earth, Her charter of salvation One Lord, one faith, one birth; One holy Name she blesses, Partakes one holy food. And to one hope she presses, With ev'ry grace endued.	"Out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation." (Rev 5:9) "We being many are one Bread and one Body." (1Co 10:17) "One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism." (Eph 4:5) "There is none other Name under Heaven...whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) "We all are partakers of that one Bread." (1Co 10:17b) "Called in one hope of our calling." (Eph 4:4) "...grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ." (Eph 4:7)
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The Church of Sheila

Warren Wiersbe tells the story of a free-lance missionary who visited a pastor friend of his, asking for financial support. “What group are you associated with?” my friend asked.

The man replied, “I belong to the invisible church.”

My friend then asked, “Well, what church are you a member of!”

Again he got the answer, “I belong to the invisible church!”

Getting a bit suspicious, my friend asked, “When does this invisible church meet? Who pastors it?”

The missionary then became incensed and said, “Well, your church here isn’t the true church. I belong to the invisible church!”

My friend replied, “Well, here’s some invisible money to help you minister to the invisible church!”¹

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“I don’t need organized religion. I can worship God my own way in the privacy of my own home.”

“I do not belong to a *local* church, but I belong to the *universal* church made up of all who believe in Jesus.”

“Can’t I just think of my little home Bible study group as my church? Why do I have to join a formal organization to please God?”

These kinds of statements and thoughts are extremely common in our hyper-individualized, pluralistic society. In fact, they are [a fundamental reason I’m doing this series on](#)

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 38.

[the church](#). We must learn to think better and biblically about Christ's church, as the story of one Sheila Larson perfectly epitomizes. So who is Sheila Larson?

In 1985, sociologist [Robert Bellah](#) told us the story of [Sheila](#), a young nurse who had received a good deal of therapy and described her faith by her own name: "[Sheilaism](#)." This suggested the logical possibility of more than 235 million American religions [we can add over 100 million more to that now], one for each of us. "[I believe in God](#)," Sheila says. "[I am not a religious fanatic](#)." Notice at once that in our culture any strong statement of belief necessarily implies a fanaticism that you must at all costs disarm. Wouldn't want those around. "[I can't remember the last time I went to church](#)," she said. "[My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice](#)."

Bellah noticed that Sheila's faith had some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many. Defining what she called "[my own Sheilaism](#)," she said: "[It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other](#)."² Like many others, Sheila would be willing to endorse few more specific points, or I might add, places of worship.

² [Robert Bellah](#) and Richard Madsen, [*Habits of the Heart*](#) (University of California Press: 1985, 1996), 221.

A year later, Bellah used the phrase of “religious privatism” to describe this. Religion for most people these days is essentially a private matter and there is no particular constraint on them placed by the historic church, or even by the Bible and the tradition. He cited a Gallup poll indicating that 80 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that “an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues.” And this was nearly 40 years ago now, and that didn’t just appear out of nowhere.

He cited a 1946 play written by the brilliant novelist, playwright, and critic Dorothy Sayers. In the play, a Royal Air Force pilot is killed and then returns to his native city of Litchfield in England where he finds himself welcomed by the town’s people from the past centuries who required him to stake his claim to citizenship. The town recorder says to the young man, “What matters here is not so much what you did as why you did it. Can you recite your creed?” The airman says, “I believe in God.” Suddenly, the chorus of town’s people pick him up and carry him along saying together, “... the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ.” But just as suddenly, the airman breaks in a says,

“No! No! No! What made me start off like that. I reacted automatically to the word creed. My personal creed is something totally different.” As Bellah says, this is [Sheilaism in 1946](#) in the church of England.

He goes on to say something profound,

Many people *sitting in the pews* of Protestant and even Catholic churches are Sheilaists ... The notion that religious belief ought to be a purely internal thing, and then you go to the church or synagogue of your choice, shows how deeply ingrained a kind of religious privatism is, which turns the church into something like the Kiwanis Club or some other kind of voluntary association that you go to or not if you feel comfortable with it—but which has no organic claim upon you [emphasis mine].³

Now, last time we looked at [the foundation and origins of the church](#), to try and wrap our minds around the fact that this thing is truly ancient, that it comes from God, and that Christ is her only foundation. Today we are going to look at [what the church is](#)—*its nature*. This will have direct bearing upon all this religious privatism. In our song, “The Church’s

³ Robert N. Bellah, “[Habits of the Heart: Implications for Religion](#),” *St. Mark’s Catholic Church*, Isla Vista, CA (Feb 21, 1986).

One Foundation,” which we saw last time was written to counter a creeping heresy in the churches of South Africa, the second stanza teaches us, “Elect from every nation, Yet one o’er all the earth, Her charter of salvation, ‘One Lord, one faith, one birth.’ One holy Name she blesses, partakes one holy food. And to one hope she presses, with every grace ended.” This is a great starting point for addressing its nature.

The Church Universal and Local, Visible and Invisible

Previously, we saw that “elect” language or “chosen” language is actually one of those terms that originates with Israel, which when gathered together in assembly became the OT church. The song cites **Revelation 5:9**, “Out of every kindred and tongue and people and nation.” The word “elect” is found all over the place. **Peter** writes, “To those who are *elect* exiles of the Dispersion” (**1Pe 1:1**). **Paul** writes to Titus, “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s *elect*” (**Tit 1:1**). **Jesus** says in the last days such terrible delusions will come that even the *elect* would be led astray if possible (**Mark 13:22**). In the OT, the language is “chosen.” “The Lord your God has *chosen* you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples

who are on the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6). Everyone inherently knows that unless the election is rigged, you don’t choose yourself. That’s not only self-evident, but it is exactly what the verse just said. “*The Lord your God has chosen you.*” It’s a doctrine that makes some people uncomfortable, but we aren’t really pursuing that part of it today.

The difference between the OT and NT church is contrasted by this verse and the lyric of the song. God chose the OT church “out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” But in the NT church, they are “elect from every nation.” This is the mystery that was hidden in the OT, always there, but people were unable to see it. But what a glorious truth, for it means that anyone can be grafted into the church wherever they are, no matter what their family tree. It makes election the great hope of humanity!

But the song is doing more than just bringing up election. It is contrasting two or four aspects of the church, depending on how you look at it. To get at this, I want to cite our confession of faith, which also starts off the way this second stanza does. “*The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the*

head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that fills all in all” (*LBC 1689*, 26.1). The Confession is a wise and good guide here, and it is dealing with the heart of the problem I raised at the beginning. Yet, it is **prone to misunderstanding and disagreement** by people, so let’s look at it.

Notice that it uses the language of “**catholic or universal church.**” What does this mean? Is it talking about the Roman Catholic Church, that organization that is headquartered in Vatican City? No. The word catholic simply means “**universal.**” It is an adjective describing something (i.e. the church), not a noun (i.e. “Catholic”). The Greek word is *katholikos*, from *kata* (“about”) and *holos* (“whole”). So catholic is “about the whole.” Hence, universal.

This is what the song is getting at when it says, “**one throughout the earth.**” There are not *many churches*. **There is one church.** Christ’s church. This is something that many Christians and denominations fail to understand. The many denominations that we have are not different churches. They are different *expressions* of the *one* church, and this can be a fine thing. Now, we will get into what makes a church later, because many that call themselves churches are not churches at all, but as Jesus says to Smyrna, “**synagogues of Satan**” (*Rev 2:9*). But for now, the important point is that when you see a

group that professes the Gospel, no matter how weak or small or troubled or full of other errors, that is Christ's church. And it must not be passed over that Jesus prayed earnestly just before he died that we would all act like the one church that we are (**John 17**), something that we often have not done a good job of doing. Especially in a pluralistic age like ours.

This one universal or catholic church is, of course, **made up of embodied humans**. As such, it is impossible for us to all meet in the same place together. This is why the Confession goes on to say this. “**All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called *visible saints*, and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted**” (**LBC 26.2**). Why must they meet up in particular congregations? Because, as we saw last time, one of the fundamental meanings of the word church is “**assembled**” or “**gathered**” ones. This is how it is always used in the LXX. You simply can't be a church unless you assemble. By definition. It's impossible (does the invisible church assemble? Can you be as an individual “the church”?). And this may be the most fundamental

point about how you must think of the church not merely as universal, but also local. To do anything less is unbiblical.

Think about how many books of the NT are written to local churches. “*To the church of God that is in Corinth*” (1Co 1:2). Notice, one church (singular) of God, but located in the city of Corinth. Yet he says, “*To the churches of Galatia*” (Gal 1:2). There were many churches in the region of Galatia. We know of many churches in the NT: Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, Thessalonica, Rome, Cenchreae, Antioch, Jerusalem, Sardis, Laodicea, Smyrna, and many many more. Simply put, *the vast majority of usages of the word “church” in the NT refer to local congregations* scattered throughout the known world.

So we see the language of both *universal and local* in relation to the church. *The universal church is expressed locally* through congregations of people who gather or assemble together (in God’s ordained way, which is a later sermon). They are the local physical expression of the church universal. And yet, the Confession also speaks of the church “*invisible*.” “*The catholic or universal church ... may be called invisible*,” it says. This is the idea that I think most have in mind when they think in the ways we began above. The Confession admits that we may speak of the universal church as invisible. Yet,

they are not identical ideas and I think people are often thinking quite wrongly about this.

Most important, the Confession is not trying to communicate to us that the universal church is *only* invisible, as if it is giving permission under ordinary circumstances to just be your own church of one, like Sheila does. No, what it is trying to communicate is that the church may be thought of as *invisible as it regards election*. This happens for at least a couple of reasons. *First*, we cannot see who the elect are this side of heaven. Those who are elect are part of the church. But since we can't see who they are, we can speak of this as invisible. (This doesn't mean if you have some wheat and tares living together in a local congregation that the local body isn't the church, as if the local congregation is only composed of the elect. That's simply not possible for us to know this side of heaven. The Confession, I believe rightly, insists that we only bring in members who profess the Christian Faith, and whose outward lives are not unholy or full of errors "everting the foundation," but we can't be perfect in our judgments, and the Bible never says we must for it to be a church. We are credobaptists (credo = confession), not elect-baptists in this regard.)

Not only can we not know exactly who all of the elect are around us, because some may be fooled or may be fooling us, but **not all of the elect are actually alive or have come to faith yet**. Some of the elect have not yet been born (LBC 22.1’s “**are, or shall be gathered...**”), and from the perspective of God’s decree and knowledge, they are part of the church. More practically, **many of the elect have died** (LBC’s “*that have been...*”). Yet, *they are still part* of the church. This is what Hebrews is getting at when it speaks of the “**assembly [ekklesia] of the firstborn**”⁴ (which the LBC cites). Allow me to use

⁴ Going deeper. The Greek “ἀλλὰ προσεληλύθατε Σιών ὄρει καὶ πόλει θεοῦ ζῶντος, Ἱερουσαλὴμ ἐπουρανίῳ, καὶ μυριάσιν ἀγγέλων, πανηγύρει καὶ ἐκκλησία πρωτοτόκων ἀπογεγραμμένων ἐν οὐρανοῖς” (alla proselēluzate Siōn orei kai polei zeou dsōntos, Ierousalēm epouraniō, kai muriasin angelōn, panēgurei 23 kai ekklēsia prōtotokōn apogegrammenōn en ouranois; Heb 12:22-23) has been translated in some pretty different ways. For example, the KJV says, “(22) **But ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, (23) To the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven.**” But the ESV says, “(22) **But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, (23) and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.**” Notice especially vs. 23’s the “**general assembly and church**” (KJV) vs. simply, “**the assembly**” (ESV).

It looks at first glance like either the KJV is adding a word or the ESV is subtracting one. The ESV doesn’t have the word “church” at all. However, the problem comes because of our verse divisions. What is in vs. 23 in the KJV “the general assembly and church” is actually found in vv. 22-23 in the ESV’s “(22) ... in festal gathering, (23) and to the assembly.” The ESV’s “festal gathering” is identical to the KJV’s “general assembly.” The KJV has decided to put the word from vs. 22 into vs. 23’s translation. This is what brings the first confusion.

The question becomes, how do you translate *panēgurei*? Does it properly belong to the angels’ gathering or to the human’s in heaven? That’s the distinction. But, as we saw last time with Psalm 22:22 and Hebrews 2:12 and English translators refusal to translate *ekklesia* as “church” (see the ESV’s “the assembly”), we get confusion in our English minds. Is this not really the church? That’s what the refusal to use the word “church” subtly causes us to question in our minds.

the word “church” here, which many newer translations, again, refuse to use (see n. 4). “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to *the church [ekklesia] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven*” (Heb 12:22-23). Notice that Hebrews is telling us Christians, alive right now, that when we gather, somehow, we are lifted up into heavenly places with the company of angels and the church of the firstborn in heaven, that is, the elect who have died and are assembled before the presence of God and his throne. This is our great cloud of witnesses (12:1). This is one of those rare instances where “church” is being used of the *invisible* (to us) church. It is composed of all those who have gone before us, who gather together *in heaven*. Yet, even this is still a real gathering or assembly. It just isn’t here on earth. Since it’s in heaven and we are on earth, we cannot see it. Since we cannot see it, it is invisible. Yet, it is still real.

Thus, we make two kinds of distinctions when we speak about the church. It is both universal and local and it is both visible and invisible. The universal church is invisible to us, but not to God. The invisible church consists of people we can’t see, but God does. It is not wrong to think of yourself as

a Christian as being part of the universal church. This is certainly true. However, it is wrong if you think that under normal circumstances you do not have to ever be part of a local church because you are the invisible church. That's Sheilaism, not biblical Christianity—from either Testament. I say “normal circumstances,” because sometimes there just aren't any churches around. But the goal should always be to plant one if there isn't.

Analogies for the Church

The Church as God's Temple

It is at this point that I want us to think about **our relationship to God's church**, in all four of these aspects we can think about it. The Bible gives **several different analogies** that describe this. One is, **the temple**. I'll use this one first because it builds just a little more on that idea of a foundation that we spoke of last time. Paul says, “**Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you**” (1Cor 3:16). Importantly, “**you**” here is **plural**, not singular. He is talking to the church. We are, together, part of the temple of God. Peter says that we are “**like living stones are being built up as**

a spiritual house” (1Pe 2:5). A building is not made up of one stone, but many. Only together can it actually be called a temple.

So how does this build on the idea of a foundation? Paul says we are, “Members of the household of God, built on *the foundation* of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being *the cornerstone*” (Eph 2:19-20). You built all ancient temples from a corner, starting with the straightest and best stone so that everything that you build after it will line up properly. It is the cornerstone. Jesus is our cornerstone. In an idea we will come back to a little later, Jesus gives the apostles and prophets to the church as the rest of the foundation, that is the church’s teaching and beliefs and creeds.

If we are a temple, then **we are holy**. It isn’t merely that we will be holy, but that we *are* holy. We are set apart for this very purpose, and therefore, churches and her people are to act as they are. If we are a temple and **we are living**, then this means that the old temple building is obsolete. It has served its purpose. Any return to a temple in the future would be a return to types and shadows and fundamental denial that the church is what the temple always pointed to. You, church, are the temple of God. The implications this has for our ethics and eschatology go far and wide.

The Church and the Vine

The idea of life comes through in all the other analogies as well. Let's start with the **vine and branches**. Jesus told his disciples, that foundation of the church we just saw, that **he is the vine, they are the branches (John 15:1ff)**. In the OT, **Israel was the vine. Isa 5:1-7** is probably the classic example. In it, God dresses the vine, plants it, causes it to grow. This is precisely what Jesus says the Father does in **John 15:1**. **"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."** But in saying that he is the "true vine," **Jesus is claiming to be true Israel**. He is what Israel always pointed to, but failed. A new and perfect Israel had to come, and this is what Jesus was. Thus, if anything has replaced Israel, it is not the church, but Christ. But to say that he replaces her isn't really correct, for Jesus really just fulfills, as the perfect Jew, all that those in the nation and her covenant heads were unable to fulfill themselves.

As the vine, **he is the source of our life**. We are but branches. In vinedressing, one can take a branch from another tree and **graft** it into the vine. This is because the branch is not the source of life; the vine is. Grafting allows the branch to have the vine's life pour through it so that it

might produce fruit. And produce fruit it will. This is Jesus' chief concern in this metaphor. "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2). Thus, the behavior or, again, ethics of the church is a chief outcome of this analogy. It must always be remembered who is the vine and who are the branches.

But what is a tree with only one branch? Even Charlie Brown's Christmas tree had a couple of branches. It is, at best, desperately sick, and almost surely dead. Imagine the greatest tree in all the world. How many branches does it have. Now imagine a tree with one branch. You've just answered why a Christian is never called to be a Christian by themselves. It just isn't possible.

The Church as Christ's Body

A third analogy is a body. Paul says Christ "is the head of the body, the church" (Col 1:18). If you cut off the head, what happens to the life? The body dies. One can lose an arm or a leg, a foot or a finger, but not the head. James says, "The body apart from the spirit is dead" (James 2:26). So, he connects the Spirit here to Christ as the life of the church. And

Paul, in his longest treatment of this to the Corinthians does the same thing, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1Co 12:14).

His purpose in this discussion is to help each of you see not only that you necessarily exist together, but that **none of you are irrelevant**. “For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body” (14-16).

He then tells you that **none of you are *more* important**. “If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (14-18). You can’t say that you are irrelevant *or* more important because it is God who has arranged the body as he wants it, and does so knowing full well that each part is essential to the whole. Even the appendix has a purpose!

Sometimes the church has cut off some parts of its own body. Some parts of the body sometimes try to *cut themselves*

off because they feel unimportant. Sometimes the church deliberately *segregates* the body making it all head or a foot or a heart. **This can be a danger of denominations** (which I do not view as inherently evil). Reformed churches should not be known as the head; Pentecostal churches should not be viewed as the heart. We need head and heart, arm and leg, eye and ear in every local church and denomination. **“If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (19-27).** And Christ alone is our Head.

The Church as Christ's Body

Paul says, “No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are *members of his body*” (Eph 5:29-30). But he does this in the context of a fourth analogy: *the Bride*. Again, the broader context is ethical, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ *loved the church and gave himself up for her*” (Eph 5:25). I said last time that Christ died with a specific intent of dying for the church. Why would he do this? It is because she is his bride. When Paul says that we are members of his body, the context is not merely that of a head to a body, but the oneness that happens between *a husband and wife*. “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (1Co 7:4). “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (6:19-20). Returning to James, he said as, “The body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26).

One of the great problems, and it is certainly understandable, that so many people have with church is that the people treat one another so badly. They don't act any different than

the world. As you can hear from all four of these analogies, this is not how Christ made his church to be. Yes, we are made up of sinful people and we never act perfectly towards one another. But the point here is that **the church is a peculiar people** that has its origin in a different place, belongs to a different kingdom, is given new life and new affections and new desires—*to love one another*. Only in living life together can we ever possibly hope to express this ethic to the world. If we fail, we fail, but Christ is always faithful, and we must never use our sin as an excuse to stop being the church, both in gathering together and in unity and in knowledge and in love.

The reason the church is composed of the elect and why churches are supposed to go to great lengths to see that its membership professes the right religion and acts as Christians is because **these are the only people in all the world who can carry out what is otherwise impossible**. We *can* love one another. We *can* be full of unity. We can express this in local congregations. We can show this in larger organizations and gatherings. Why? Because we belong to Christ. He is our life and has given us his Spirit.

It is interesting to me that, the **Cornerstone**, the **Vine**, the **Head**, and the **Groom** are all **in heaven**. Yet, we are the temple, the branches, the body, and the bride *on earth*. This means

that there is a vital connection of life in the church that has its source in heaven. This has so many implications, but the most important must surely be that Christ literally gives his people the power to carry out the mission he gave us. It isn't impossible, even though we are evil, because the church is his new creation by water and the word. From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride, with his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.

Foundation of the Apostles: What We Believe

This leads me to **the last thing** I want to talk about today. The second stanza in our song follows the words I just quoted. After it tells us about this invisible/visible distinction, it goes on to give us our charter. “**Her charter of salvation: One Lord, one faith, one birth.**” It describes the “**one holy Name**” we bless and the “**one holy food**” we eat. It encourages us with the “**one hope**” to which we press through the grace endowed to us by God. All of this speaks about what is **often the real reason people speak so badly about the church.**

You see, yes, it is easy to often pick on churches for how they behave. And often, those things range from poor

to despicable to reprehensible. In no way do I want to minimize the abuses that people in power in churches have wielded over the poor, over women, over children. We all know of sex scandals and patriarchal manipulation, and fleecing of the sheep. It's interesting to me, however, **that people do not hold any other institutions with such contempt** when they do the very same things. People still vote in pedophiles. People still go movies with all those people in them. People still support businesses that openly promote the same kinds of things.

It's understandable that an institution that has its true origins in heaven would be scrutinized much more severely by the watching world. They are looking for any reason they can to begrudge the church. But quite honestly, in a lot of instances, it is *what the church believes* that really makes her the target. It's just that people don't want to admit it or submit themselves to the teachings of the church.

Part of a discussion about “**what is church**” must include **our creed, our charter**. This is our nature, our foundation. Sheila basically believes in one thing: Herself. If she thinks it good, then presto—it's good. If she thinks it's bad, then obviously it is. She is the test of all orthodoxy. It is popular these days to say that there is no such thing as orthodoxy,

that all orthodoxy is really just power-hungry men making stuff up to lord their power over the people. But this is not only wrong, it is evil thinking.

We live in a day that has been dubbed, “**The Heretical Imperative.**”⁵ That is, these days, you *must* be a heretic. Orthodoxy is the only true heresy and anyone who is orthodox must be rooted out, suppressed, or destroyed. The word “**heresy**” comes from the Greek word *hairesikos* (“**able to choose**”). Thus, heresy literally means “a choice.” In a post-modern, democratic, individualistic, pluralistic, consumeristic world, you must be a heretic by definition, because everything is about what you choose, rather than what God chooses.

We’ve already talked about election and one of the reasons that makes people mad is because they believe this takes away all choice. It doesn’t. What it takes away is that idea that you make the choice before God does. But the **church is filled with doctrines that we believe because God gave them to us.** No human would ever conceive of the doctrines the church has been given by him, because they come from him.

⁵ **Peter L. Berger**, *Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Doubleday, 1980).

The church didn't invent the doctrine of sin. The church didn't invent the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. The church didn't invent the doctrine of the resurrection. God told us about all these doctrines in his Word and his word is written by eye-witnesses to the glory of Christ himself as they were inspired by the Spirit to write. so that we might know everything we need to know about how to be saved and how to live lives pleasing to God.

The song narrows in on one particular passage in Ephesians 4. There is, “One body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6). Someone has said of this that Paul anticipates, “The sequence of the confessional elements collected in the Apostolic, Nicene, and later Christian Creeds ... in reverse order: first the Spirit is praised, then Christ, then the Father.”⁶ It does so through three couplets (pairs) consisting of six uses of the word “one.” One body. One Spirit. One hope. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. These six match

⁶ Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 4-6*, vol. 34A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 463.

up in pairs as 1-4; 2-5; 3-6.⁷ These six terminate in a seventh “one.” “**One God and Father of all.**” The number one imposes upon our minds the **unity** of the church, something we’ve talked a lot about already—the unity of our Faith that comes from the One God. Three imposes the **Triune** persons. Seven is the number of **perfection and new creation**. Let’s look at each briefly. (I’ll look at them as the literary pairs that they are; see n. 7).

One body. The first is “**one body**” (**Eph 4:4**). This refers to **the living temple** we talked about earlier. Bodies are complicated things, made up of many parts (**1Co 12:20**). In this way, the body image describes both diversity and unity.

This body is an objective reality. It consists of all believers who are in Christ today, yesterday, and tomorrow. We here in 2023 are part of the same body Paul was speaking to. In this way, you can think of your own body when you were young and how you look much different today, and

⁷ This is the chronological ordering. The literary ordering is 1 with 4, 2 with 5, 3 with 6:
One **body**. One **Lord** (body/head;
One **Spirit**. One **faith** (1Co 12:3)
One **hope**. One **baptism**.

Martin explains, “**one body (=the church)—one Lord (the church’s head) | one Spirit (by which Christ is confessed)—one faith (1 Cor. 12:3) | one hope (accepted in baptism)—one baptism (1 Cor. 12:13)**.” See **Ralph P. Martin**, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1991), 48.

yet you still have the same body, even though every cell in your body has been replaced, perhaps several times over.

If we are all one body, then it makes no sense to seek to harm it through division or hostility. Who cuts off their own leg for fun? Who hurts themselves on purpose? That is what mentally ill people do. And yet, this one body is not everybody. In the [parallelism](#) of the context,⁸ and as we have already seen, the body belongs to this head. Bodies without heads are dead. The head gives life. The church has its life in Christ and this is a foundational doctrine that makes the church the church.

One Lord. This is where the “one Lord” ([Eph 4:5](#)) comes into play. Lord (Gk: *Kurios*) is the word Jesus was often called by the Disciples. And yet, it is also the word that usually translates Adonai from the OT, who is himself often the Second Person of the Trinity (cf. [Ps 110:1](#)). One Lord is not

⁸ The larger context is a chiasm where vv. 4-6 parallel vv. 15-16.

- A. “Walk” (1)
- B. “Love” and “Unity” (2-3)
- C. Seven doctrines (4-6)
- D. “Measure” “Christ” (7)
- E. “Gave” (8)
- F. “Ascended” (9a)
- G. “Descended” (9b)
- G¹. “Descended” (10a)
- F¹. “Ascended” (10b)
- E¹. “Gave” (11-12)
- D¹. “Measure” “Christ” (13)
- C¹. “Doctrine” (14)
- B¹. “Love” “Joined Together” (15-16)
- A¹. “Walk” (17)

referring to the Spirit or the Father. It most certainly is not referring to Zeus or Baal (both of which mean “Lord”). It is referring to the Son, for he is the Head of the body (**Col 1:18**). There is only one Lord Jesus Christ, the one presented in the pages of Holy Scripture. If you are not in Christ, then you are not in the body. If you are in Christ, then know that the unity you are to strive for on earth is true because you all have one Lord.

One Spirit. This objective unity is further manifested in the repeat of the word “Spirit.” There is “one” Spirit (**Eph 4:4**). He is the Third Person of the Trinity. No other spirit is the one Spirit. Not your spirit. Certainly not an evil spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who regenerates us, puts us in the Body, and gives us our unity and peace together. We believe in him as a foundational creed of the church universal.

One Faith. We are put into the body through believing in something that we confess. Literarily, the **parallel** to the Spirit is *one Faith* (**Eph 4:5**). Faith should be capitalized here in my opinion. It isn’t talking about having faith, for I have my faith and you have your faith and that would mean there are many faiths rather than one. It is talking about confessing The Faith. One Faith. Jude said, “**Contend for The Faith that was once for all delivered to the saints**” (**Jude 1:3**). He

didn't say "a faith" but "the faith." There is only one Faith and that is the content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and what he has done for us and how we are saved by faith through grace. Not any old faith. Not another faith like Buddhism or Islam. Not whatever we decide to believe out of The Faith (remember our definition of "heresy." Heresy is a "choice"). It is the Faith as expressed in our creeds and confessions which come outside of ourselves, not from men, but from God's holy word. And through this word, he saves and sanctifies his Bride.

One Hope. Our collective Faith in Christ leads us to "one hope" (Eph 4:4). Paul has spoken about it as "hoping in Christ" (Eph 1:12). It is the "hope to which he has called you" (18). Previously we were "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12). And so our hope is that we are with God and will be with God forever. Our hope is that he will bring us to heaven even as he has justified us and taken away our sin. This, he says, "belongs to your call."

One baptism. Our hope seems to be paralleled one baptism (Eph 4:5). It is easy to understand the Body and its Lord (Head) and the Spirit and the Faith we confess by him, but what is the relationship between hope and baptism? There are no other passages that closely relate these two things.

The key is trying to figure out what baptism refers to. Most have taken it to speak of our **baptism in water**. But why? Lloyd-Jones notices that water baptism “**undoubtedly raises a query in the minds of many, as to how this ‘one baptism’ promotes unity, because it is a notorious fact that the whole question of baptism has frequently led to discussion and division and separation.**”⁹ True, it wasn’t that way in Paul’s day, but it certainly is in our own.

Paul doesn’t specify that this is what he is talking about. Besides, there is in fact **more than one baptism in the Scripture**. In the NT alone we have the baptism of John (**Matt 3:1-6**), Jesus in the Jordan (**Matt 3:16**). His second baptism on the cross (**Mark 10:38-39**). The baptism of the Holy Spirit (**Acts 1:5**). And the baptism which saves (**1Pe 3:21**). Without going into detail about what these all are, surely we can agree that they are not all the same. That doesn’t mean that they don’t have overlapping meaning. Of course, they do. Nor does it mean that something like our water baptism isn’t a sign and seal of a spiritual reality. It surely does.

But let’s look at Peter who talks about a baptism that “**saves you.**” He says it is “***Not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the***

⁹ **D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones**, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 120

resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1Pe 3:21). I would argue that Peter is talking here about an inner baptism, a washing or sprinkling of the heart as Hebrews puts it (Heb 10:22). Sprinkling is a form of OT baptism, though it isn’t the only form. Notice how it clearly distinguishes two kinds of baptism: “Our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:22). The latter outwardly signifies the former, but it does not save you.

I believe it is our common baptism into Christ when we are saved that Paul is talking about here. Lloyd-Jones calls it, “that which [water] baptism represents and signifies.”¹⁰ This is the “one baptism.” It is a spiritual baptism. One scholar writes,

It refers metaphorically to the believer’s baptism into Christ’s death, speaking of the believers’ union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Baptism signifies identification as seen in the baptism of Israel into Moses as they went through the Red Sea (1 Cor 10:2) and the baptism of the disciples with reference to Christ’s death (Mark 10:38) ... This same concept is seen in other NT passages (Rom 6:1-

¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, 122. He rejects that it refers to baptismal regeneration by water baptism, the mode of baptism (sprinkling or pouring or immersion), or to the “rite of baptism”

11; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12) ... This inward reality is all too often missed. It serves as the basis of the outward ritual. Hence, the “one baptism” most likely refers to the internal reality of having been baptized into (identified with) the “one Lord” by means of the “one faith” mentioned in this verse.¹¹

This makes baptism essential as a foundation of the church, because without it, no one is saved. It is through this inward washing by faith that we come by our hope in Christ.

One God and Father. The final and seventh “one” is, appropriately, the one God and Father (Eph 4:6). From the Spirit to the Son to the Father, Paul has summed up our great God. The Father is the source of all, and he is the God and Father of all. He is “over all and through all and in all” (6). He is *Almighty*. He is *all*-knowing. He is *all*-present. When we are saved, he becomes our Father in a special sense, though even before that “we are all his offspring.” Thus, it is appropriate to end with the Father as the perfect seven come to their completion.

When you understand the oneness of our perfect-seven-fold faith and Triune God, when you understand the unity and peace that the Spirit has already wrought in Christ’s

¹¹ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 518.

church, when you understand the Oneness of God: Father, Son, and Spirit, when you understand the oneness that we have in Christ as his body, when you understand the oneness of our hope and baptism and faith, then you are ready to obey the Lord not out of duty of obligation, but out of evangelical obedience. That's how the church finds its unity.

Today we've looked at [the nature and the confession of the church](#). The church is both local and universal, visible yet invisible. This is her nature. Yet, her nature is also that she confesses a common, unified faith. These doctrines can make people mad, but it must be understood that they come from God himself. To understand this, you must believe in the church and what she *really* is. When you do, you can see that she is not like other institutions in this world. Sure, we may incorporate, we may have to do mundane business here, but the church's nature is not that of a corporation, but that of a living temple and branches and body and bride who belong to Christ and whom he has given the power to believe the truth about through all the amazing means of grace he has given to us.

If the church is like this, then we are [not permitted the Lone-Ranger Christianity](#) that so many today confess. We cannot go it alone, nor should we want to. The Confession

gives us two wise words with which I will leave you. First, we do not join the church against our will, but do so “*willingly consent to walk together, according to the appointment of Christ*” (LBC 26.5). And why? “For [our] mutual edification, and the due performance of that public worship, which he requires of [us] in the world.” We will turn to those duties and means of grace next time. Today, be confronted with the reality of this assembly, this church. See that she is a gathering, an assembly. James Bannerman in his masterful book on the church noted, “Christianity is not merely a personal religion, but in its very nature a social one.”¹² This is what we are confronted with today. Learn to love Christ’s bride together. Walk in love and unity in the fellowship of the Spirit. If you do, it will make all the difference in the world to your life and it will make all the difference to the life of this fallen world, which so desperately needs Christians to once again be the church, together, locally, in creed, in unity, and in love.

¹² James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868), 187.

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