

“Christ or the Church?”

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“To whom shall we go?” This question was asked by Simon Peter, in the presence of the other disciples, concerning the source of that wisdom which leads to salvation. It is asked by many others today who would be made wise unto salvation; but not always is it answered as it was by Peter.

Peter’s question and answer were addressed to Christ. He said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:68, 69). But many now answer the same question by turning to “the church.” This was not Peter’s answer. He was himself an apostle, and could speak with as much wisdom and authority as any one of the followers of Christ; but both he and the other apostles with him confessed their own spiritual insufficiency in the question, “Lord, to whom shall we go?” Whoever might have come to the apostles for the words of eternal life would not have found them, except as the apostle spoke the words of Christ. And every individual who is a component part of “the church” today is just as dependent upon Christ for the words of eternal life as was Peter. And the Saviour is just as accessible to every individual who desires to hear the words of life as He was to Peter.

Peter never invited the attention of those whom he addressed to himself, or to “the church.” In his first epistle he writes: “as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious. Coming to Him *as to* a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God *and* precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:2-5).

There is laid in Zion a “chief corner stone,” which is the Lord Jesus Christ. To that Stone every seeker of salvation must come; to that alone are they invited by the Lord to come. They must fall on the Rock and be broken. The church is but the light that God has placed in the world to show men the way to Christ, the living Stone.

The church existed long before the time of Peter; for the church is the body of Christ, and Christ has been the spiritual Head of His followers ever since the time of Adam. The martyr Stephen said that the great company who went with Moses out of Egypt constituted “the congregation¹ in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38). So there was the church in the time of Peter and the other apostles, for the same spiritual organization had been retained from the time of Moses, with its system of sacrifices and beautiful temple, which stood in the place of the tabernacle which Moses built. The “congregation in the wilderness” was the true church of Christ; for we are told “they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4).

Frequently they rebelled against the Lord, and their descendants did the same; but the Lord, though they often rejected Him, did not reject them; so that even as late as the time of Peter, Jesus said of them, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. Therefore whatever they tell you *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do”

(Matt.23:2, 3). But if Peter had sought to “the church” for spiritual light and wisdom, he would not have been a follower of Christ; for “the church” rejected Him and put Him to death. “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).

If Martin Luther and his fellow-workers had made “the church” the spiritual guide, the world would never have heard from them the preaching of the Gospel in the Reformation. Yet they found the Word of the Lord—the Holy Scriptures—and gave that Word to the people, having first received it into their own hearts. They drank from the fountain of life, and then led others to the same fountain. They all as did ancient Israel, “drank of that spiritual Rock that went with them,” which was Christ. And Christ Himself is still the fountain of life today.

“Who can bring a clean *thing* out of an unclean? No one!” (Job 14:4). Who can bring infallibility out of fallibility? When any number of fallible beings take action together, the result is fallibility still. They can produce only fallible decisions and speak only fallible words, yet Christ the Word is infallible and can be held forth as enduring and unchanging, for Christ Himself said: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away” (Mark 13:31).

There is an infallible Guide, which will guide the believer into all spiritual truth; and that Guide is the “Comforter,”—the Holy Spirit, whom the Father gives willingly to all that ask Him. (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). Thus God has given us His Word, which is the Word of life, and His Spirit, whose office is to guide us into all truth and reveal to us the things of God. All this is free to rich and poor, and to learned and unlearned, alike. And therefore no one has any occasion or excuse for being led by any other word or guide. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).

The principle of looking to “the church” for spiritual guidance is the principle of the Papacy, and is consistent with papal assumptions and claims, —implying as it does that God is far off from mankind, so that He needs a vicegerent here to carry on His work, who must needs demonstrate his infallibility, which is necessary to his acting in God’s stead, by a vote of several hundred men, all of whom are fallible. But God is not far off from every one of us, Christ is with His people to the end of the world, and His sheep hear His own voice, and know not the voice of a stranger. There is nothing that has any rightful place between the soul and Him.

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ⁱ Congregation: marginal reading gives alternate reading of assembly or church