Christ and His Church

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Anders Nygren, the well-known Swedish churchman, wrote an incisive work a few years ago under the title Christ and His Church. When preparing for this study with you I could think of no better description for what I hope you will consider with me for the next few minutes.

To talk about “Christ and His Church” is to remind ourselves that Jesus promised “upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Our Master also once told a group of His followers, “There are some here of them that stand by, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1).

As Jesus prayed in His model prayer, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth,” so whenever men honor God’s will as revealed and expressed in Christ, the Church that belongs to Christ “comes” into being. As Nygren remarks on page ninety-six of his work just mentioned, “The Church is Christ as he is present among and meets us upon earth after his resurrection.”

To talk about “Christ and the Church” is to suggest the possibility of an evolutionary, socialistic, humanistic organization. The Church of Jesus Christ to the contrary started in fullness of strength and completeness of detail on a definite day immediately following Christ’s ascension, a festival day known to the Jews as Pentecost, in Jerusalem. The events that surrounded that solid historical event are recorded by Luke in the second chapter of Acts. The Church is not the product of historical forces. Christ’s Church did not evolve through the centuries. We study that divine body, envisioned by God, planned by Christ, and brought into being under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:8-12; Matthew 16:16-19; Acts 2:1-4). For very obvious reasons our study centers in “Christ and His Church.”

In earlier studies this month we described the nature of the Church calling her, according to Isaiah’s prophecy, “God’s Great House.” Should you desire a copy of that lesson, simply request sermon number 771 by writing to the address Robert Holton will give you in a few minutes.

The New Testament also repeatedly identifies the Church as the body of Christ. Paul says that God “gave him (Christ) to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all” (Ephesians 1:22, 23). In his Letter to the Colossians the same apostle says of Christ, “he is the head of the body, the church: . . .” (Colossians 1:18).

Later in the same chapter he again defines Christ’s body as “the church” (Colossians 1:24). Paul provides an extended study of the Church as Christ’s body in I Corinthians, chapter 12, drawing some very important conclusions about the Church that belongs to Christ.

But the most vivid description of “Christ and His Church” appears in chapter five, verses 22 through 32, of Ephesians. At least five areas of relationship between Christ and the Church are explained by the Apostle Paul in this passage. The analogy used to illustrate this relationship is that of the marriage relationship between husband and wife. In the closing verse of this study Paul remarks about the marriage union, “This mystery is great: but I speak in regard of Christ and of the Church” (Ephesians 5:32). Follow carefully as we look into this brilliant explanation of “Christ and His Church.”
First, we learn that Christ is head of the Church. “For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, being himself the saviour of the body” (Ephesians 5:23). Earlier in the same epistle Paul showed that God so planned this, raised Christ from the dead, and placed Him at His right hand, having “put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body...” (Ephesians 1:19-23).

This is a natural position for Christ because of the nature of the Church — the body of Christ (Colossians 1:24). In the second chapter of Colossians the apostle reminds us that we ought to hold fast “the Head, from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God” (Colossians 2:19).

The New Testament neither reveals nor allows for the possibility for another or additional head of the Church. If Christ is alive today; if Christ is powerful today; if Christ is “the same yesterday and to-day, yea and for ever”; then why the attempt to honor and revere a human head of Christ's Church? The fact is that Christ is represented upon the earth today by every Christian, by the royal priesthood of all believers (I Peter 2:5, 9, 10; Revelation 1:6).

Second, we notice from Ephesians five, that Christ is the Savior of His Church. Not only is Christ “the head of the church,” but according to the same verse, He is “the saviour of the body” (Ephesians 5:23). Paul explains in II Timothy 2:10, salvation “is in Christ Jesus.” When in doubt about whether the Church is important or not, remember Calvary. Christ died for the Church’s birthday. After telling of the sermon preached that day, after recounting how the audience responded in repentance and baptism, Luke tells us in the last verse of the chapter, “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved,” or “such as were being saved” (Acts 2:47, KJV). Christ is the Church’s Savior. He gave His body that we might live. We become members of His body which was given for our salvation in our obedience to His gospel.

Third, we learn in Ephesians five, that the Church is subject to Christ. The first verse of our text says, “Wives, be in subjection unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22). At verse twenty-four of the same reading Paul says, “But as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives also be to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:24).

This relationship of subjection on the Church’s part necessarily follows from the proper understanding of Christ's roles as head and savior of the Church, relationships already studied in our lesson. The Apostle Peter calls Jesus Christ “the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls” (I Peter 2:25). The term “Bishop” may more clearly be translated “Overseer,” and thus Peter calls Christ “The Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” The New Testament talks about lesser shepherds and overseers for local groups of Christians in I Timothy 3, Titus 1, I Peter 5, and Acts 20.

In these passages the qualifications, duties, and distinct roles of these men, and another group known as deacons, are given. One also notices that such men, known as Elders, Bishops, Shepherds, with the Deacons, were responsible for the spiritual guidance and leadership of only one congregation or local group of believers. Christ's Church has one universal head, Jesus Himself.

Christ’s Church has local leaders for individual congregations. Beyond this one finds no Biblical warrant for the exaggerated hierarchical systems that abound in our day. One becomes a Christian by surrendering to and openly declaring his allegiance to the Lord Jesus (Romans 10:9, 10). This means that the Christian and the Church has one head and is subject to one Lord Jesus Christ.

Fourth, Christ loves the Church according to our study of Ephesians five. Listen as Paul describes this love, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it” (Ephesians 5:25). The analogy of husband and wife is the vehicle Paul employs throughout this reading to describe Christ's relationship with His Church. The same analogy is also employed by Paul in II Corinthians when he chides the Christians there with these words: "For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy: for I espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ" (II Corinthians 11:2). The Church stands betrothed to Christ the bridegroom, Paul explains here.

The Church’s responsibility included preparation through purity of life and obedience to meet the loving bridegroom, Jesus Christ. He loves the Church as the bridegroom loves and cherishes the bride. John, the Apostle and author of Revelation, saw “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:9).

An angel “carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high,” John writes, “and showed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Revelation 21:10). This same holy city is described earlier in the same twenty-first chapter of Revelation as "a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2).

The nature of Christ’s love for the Church is further illustrated by Paul in our text, “Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his own wife loveth himself; for no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as Christ also the church; because we are members of his body” (Ephesians 5:28-30).

Christ’s love for the Church is as natural and as deep as His love for Himself, just like the husband’s love for his wife is of the same intensity of expression as the instinct of self-preservation. This love that Christ has for the Church creates His willingness to “nourish” and “cherish” her because, after all, as Christians in the Church, “we are members of his body.”

When in doubt about whether the Church is important or not, remember Calvary. Christ died for the Church. Christ loves the Church. Did He die for, and does He love a non-essential institution, a human organization? Thank God, the Church of the Bible, that belongs to Christ, is neither a non-essential institution nor a human organization.

Fifth, let me emphasize, with Paul in Ephesians five, that Christ sacrificed Himself for the Church. Verse twenty-five says that Christ not only “loved the church,” but that He also “gave himself up for it” (Ephesians 5:25). He died on the cross “for our trespasses, and was
raised for our justification.” Paul explains in Romans 4:25. Here we see the inseparability of the Christian and the Church. Christ died for each of us but, according to our text, He also died for the Church. Paul tells the elders of the congregation at Ephesus, “to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

Christ made the supreme sacrifice of His life for the Church on the following two accounts according to Ephesians five: “that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:26, 27).

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews makes a similar statement about Christ’s sacrifice for individual Christians. “By which will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Hebrews 10:10).

The process by which Christ sanctifies the Church, or individuals for that matter, is specified in our text, “having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word.” Jesus commissioned His apostles to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

The Jewish ruler, Nicodemus, had the new birth explained by Jesus in the following terms: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). This “washing of regeneration” and “renewing of the Holy Spirit” is the way God saves us, Paul explains in Titus 3:5. In our text Paul says that Christ cleanses the church with the Gospel — “the word” — and the Gospel commands of faith, repentance, and baptism — “the washing of water” (Ephesians 5:26).

At this point one can observe some very striking similarities between what Christ does for the Church and what He does for individual believers. He died for both on Calvary. His blood is the only spiritual cleansing power available to both. He is the Lord of both. Both reach Christ’s blood in the same Biblically prescribed manner — full trust in the Gospel and obedience in baptism. All of these similarities are not coincidental! They occur by design, the design of God. Remember Acts 2:47? “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47, KJV). The same thought is expressed by Paul in I Corinthians. “But now hath God set the members each one of them in the body, even as it pleased him” (I Corinthians 12:18).

Christ died for your freedom from sin and your confidence in eternal life. When you surrender to Him becoming a member of His body, you thus by that very obedience, enter His Church. “Christ and His Church,” yours to fully, thrillingly, confidently accept in meaningful partnership as you become a Christian!

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He is a graduate of Tennessee Tech and has written a book, “The Praying Christ and Other Sermons” and two tracts. Chalk was nominated for the Outstanding Young Man of Tennessee in 1964 and was named Cookeville’s Young Man of the Year in 1963.