

The Church, its Foundation, Preservation, and Glory

Being members of the Christian Church, we can enjoy the privilege of being subject only to Christ, our divine Lord and Master.

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, we do not have someone sitting in the temple of God, exalting himself above all that is called God. Some people will even say, and maybe they are not wrong, that the Pope is the Antichrist. They adduce this from the idea that he makes his own word the rule and standard of faith and life.

It is true that at all times God bestows special gifts upon certain members of the Church, and calls these to be teachers of their fellow believers. Paul tells us in his letter to the Ephesians that some people were called to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers (Eph 4:11-13). However, when these people are called, it is to urge Christ's Word. Peter tells us that if anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God (1 Pt 4:11). It is not the word of man that is to be taught.

Indeed, if anyone does preach his own word or doctrines, and not the Word of Christ, then he is conceited and understands nothing (1 Tm 6:4). These kinds of teachers should be avoided at all times. They should be rejected and shunned as people who pervert and corrupt. Even the holy apostles did not command obedience in so far as they were human beings, but their word must be heard and heeded solely because it was God's Word, given by divine inspiration.

People called to be ministers of the Word are not mediators between God and the believers, for all Christians have access to God's throne through the One Mediator, namely Christ, in whom they believe. In fact, all believers are the immediate possessors of all gifts and blessings that have been secured by Christ for His Church, such as the means of grace and the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

The Roman Church mistranslates Matthew 16: 1 8, which reads "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I shall build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." They say that Christ built His Church on Peter. However, Martin Luther was correct when he said, "All Christians are Peters on account of the confession of Christ, which Peter here made. This confession is the rock upon which Peter and all Peters are built." The above words of our Lord cannot refer to the person of Peter either as the primary apostle or as the representative of the apostles; for, from the context of this Scripture passage, Peter here was acting as a believing Christian. From the original Greek, Peter (*petros*) is masculine, while rock (*petra*) is feminine. In this passage of Scripture, Christ clearly distinguishes between Peter and his confession; for had He meant to make Peter the rock of the Church, He should have said, "You are Peter, and upon you I shall build My Church. "

If this seems to be getting a bit too technical, then all that needs to be remembered is that the Church that is built upon the confession of Christ is built upon Christ Himself.

Saving faith is entirely the work of God, and the Church owes its existence and preservation entirely to divine grace. Synergism, which makes the faith of man depend in part on his own effort, therefore undermines the very foundation of the Church.

The instrument or means that God uses to gather and sustain His Church is the Gospel in all its various forms of application (the Word and Sacraments), through which the Holy Spirit gives rise to and preserves faith.

Believers are instrumental causes of the Church inasmuch as they preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments. In this sense, the visible Church on earth is the mother of all believers, who like Isaac are children of promise (Gl 4:26-28). Luther declares, "Sarah, or Jerusalem, is our free mother, namely, the Church, Christ's bride, by which we are all born. But she bears children without ceasing till the end of the world by the ministry of the Word, that is, by teaching and spreading the Gospel; for that is what to bear means. The Church should do nothing else than teach the Gospel in its truth and purity and thus bear children."

After thinking in this way, we may now say something about Church and State. It is a characteristic of the Roman and the Reformed Churches to intermingle Church and State in principle and practice. We, however absolutely reject this line of thought. If the two are allowed to mingle, they will produce harm. The Church loses nothing of its dignity or power by being independent of the civil government. On the contrary, its freedom from the restrictions of the civil law enables it to attend to its sacred duty of proclaiming the Word all the more efficiently.

We must, however, be careful not to interpret the independent constitution of the Church as a sort of means of grace, which in itself makes it more effective in saving souls. The success of the Church depends entirely on the testimony of the Gospel in its entire truth and the administration of the Sacraments according to Christ's institution. With regard to existing forms of government, the Augsburg Confession is right when it says, "The Gospel teaches an eternal righteousness of the heart. Meanwhile it does not destroy the State or the family,

but very much requires that they be preserved as ordinances of God and that charity be practised in such ordinances. Therefore Christians are necessarily bound to obey their own magistrates and laws, save only when commanded to sin; for then they ought to obey God rather than men, (Ac 5:29).”

Perhaps now we could say a few words on the limits which government officials, who are at the same time Christians, ought to observe in furthering the Church.

Civil authorities have neither right nor duty to command or to ordain anything in ecclesiastical matters. On the other hand, if the public officials are Christians, they should certainly not and cannot forget their Christianity. It is certainly not right if a Christian whom God has elevated to a high position should carefully hide his Christianity. If they have the opportunity, any Christians in a governmental position should proclaim the Gospel. However, they must carefully distinguish between the provinces of the Church and of the State. They should bear in mind, on the one hand, that the State cannot be governed alone by God’s Word or ‘Christian principles,’ but only by reason and common sense. They should bear in mind, on the other hand, that the Church is governed alone by God’s Word and not by any dictates of reason or by the external coercion of laws.

During the Reformation, the prevailing conditions prevented Luther from carrying into effect his clear principle regarding the separation of Church and state. Nevertheless, he did not cease to declare this principle as the only correct and Scriptural one.