THE GLORIOUS BODY OF CHRIST

A Scriptural Appreciation of the One Holy Church

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST
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**Preface**

That a crying need exists for a popular presentation of Christian doctrine, in particular of the Reformed faith, is to my mind beyond question. This volume represents an attempt in that direction with reference to the teaching of Holy Scripture concerning the church of Christ.

In different periods of the history of Christian doctrine the major emphasis has been on different truths. Today the theological limelight is turned largely on the doctrine of the church. This constitutes one reason for my writing on that subject. Another reason is more personal. In my teaching of Practical Theology over a period of some twenty-five years I have of necessity given much attention to ecclesiology. And because the church, particularly its Protestant manifestation, in spite of the current interest in ecclesiology, is not being held, either by the world or by its own membership, in the high esteem to which it is entitled, I have chosen to write specifically on its glory.

From October, 1947, to February, 1952, I contributed monthly articles to *The Presbyterian Guardian* on "The Glory of the Christian Church." In response to numerous requests those articles are here reproduced. Of the many alterations and additions that were made only Chapter 26 on the church's Supreme Task needs to be specified. It is an adaptation of a contribution by me to the December, 1952, and January, 1953, issue of *Torch and Trumpet*. I wish to thank the Presbyterian Guardian Publishing Corporation and the Reformed Fellowship, Inc., for permission to revise and re-publish that material.

When I wrote the aforementioned articles I was a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. I had previously been, and am now again, a minister in the Christian Reformed Church. I had also held a pastorate in the
Reformed Church in America. However, in my description of the glory of the church I did not have in mind any particular denomination but rather the church described in the Apostles’ Creed as “catholic.” And it may not be forgotten that any body of believers, in order to deserve to be denominated a Christian church, must be a manifestation of the church universal, which is Christ’s body.

This study is intended to be pre-eminently Scriptural. Occasionally the creeds of Christendom are quoted and outstanding theologians are recognized, but my chief concern is to give the reader some glimpses of the marvelous glory of the body of Christ as that glory shines forth resplendently from God’s infallible Word.

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INTRODUCTION

HAS THE GLORY DEPARTED?

The Word of God tells us that Christ’s church is glorious. Not only does history ascribe to it a past that is in many respects glorious and does prophecy predict for it a glorious future, it is essentially glorious. The Christian church is glorious in its very nature.

Today the glory of the church is thickly veiled. It is no exaggeration to assert that in the main it presents a picture of advanced decadence and extreme feebleness.

To be sure, not everyone will subscribe to that evaluation. There is much talk in our day of a religious revival the world over, especially in these United States of America; and the fact that a larger percentage than ever before — six out of ten — of our population holds membership in one church or another is cited as conclusive evidence of that revival. The church is said to be advancing from glory unto glory. However, that judgment excels in superficiality.

To measure the glory of the church in terms of numbers is, to say the least, precarious. When the Roman emperor Constantine, in the year 323, gave official recognition to the Christian church, he, in the words of one historian, “clothed the church in royal purple.” In consequence its membership increased by leaps and bounds. Church membership became the fashion. Perhaps history is repeating itself. In fact, there can be little doubt that it is. Once more church membership is becoming fashionable. It enhances one’s respectability. Likely many who join the church are Christians only in name.

Due to the influence of Rabbi Liebman, Bishop Sheen and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale many are flocking into the churches in quest of peace of mind; yet few seem to realize that the one and only way to achieve peace is through the
atoning blood of Jesus Christ. Nor is it generally understood that the Christian life is one of constant warfare. He who is at peace with God is by that very token at war with Satan, the world and the flesh.

True, the impact of evangelist William Franklin Graham’s preaching is nothing short of phenomenal. Through it many thousands from every walk of life are being led into the churches. This may be a harbinger of better days ahead for Protestantism. However, it is a disturbing fact that many of Graham’s converts unite with churches that adulterate the gospel. And history teaches that the results of mass evangelism are difficult to appraise. Unless it is accompanied by intensive study of the Word of God, its fruits usually have not proved abiding.

Let it be said emphatically, the church is where the truth is. Sound doctrine always has been, is today, and ever will be the foremost mark of the true church. But who dares to assert that there is today in the churches a rising tide of interest in doctrine? By and large people do not go to church to learn about God from His infallible Word, but rather to be tranquilized. And that the glory of God is both the beginning and the end of common worship does not seem to occur to them.

The fact remains that the Christian church of our day finds itself in a sorry plight. It seems despicable rather than glorious. However, that fact renders insistence on its essential glory all the more necessary.

The following chapters constitute a series that sets forth from various viewpoints the inherent glory of the church of Christ, which is His body. By way of background, it may be well first to enumerate a few of the factors that have contributed to its apparently sad state at the present time.

The world has ever opposed the church and always will. The struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent is not only perennial but perpetual.
Chapter 1

THE ANTIQUITY AND PERPETUITY
OF THE CHURCH

ITS BIRTHDAY

How old is the Christian church?

In the counsel of God the church existed from eternity. At a subsequent point in this study of the church’s glory that truth will be considered. At this juncture we are concerned with the church in history. The question is how long ago in human history the church originated.

Two answers have been given to that question. Christian theology generally says that the church originated in the garden of Eden immediately after the fall of man, when God promised a Saviour and man accepted that promise in faith. On the other hand, many take it for granted that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a little more than nineteen hundred years ago, marks the birthday of the Christian church.

Which of those answers is correct? That can best be decided in the light of a definition of the church. If we know precisely what the church is, it should not be difficult to determine whether or not it existed before Pentecost. Now the Apostles’ Creed defines the church as “the communion of saints.” It is just as correct to say that it is the communion of believers. Was there a communion of believers in Old Testament times? There certainly was. Ever since the fall of man there has been but one Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, and but one way of being saved; namely, through faith in Him. As New Testament saints are saved through faith in the Christ of history, so Old Testament saints were saved through faith in the
Christ of prophecy. The Christ of prophecy and the Christ of history are, of course, identical. And so Isaiah, David, Abraham, Abel and a host of others were members of the one body of Christ, His church. And if we assume, as undoubtedly we may, that Adam and Eve believed the promise of God that the seed of the serpent would indeed bruise the heel of the seed of the woman, but that the woman’s seed would bruise the serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15), then it may be asserted that they constituted the first Christian church.

ITS MATURITY

It must not be thought that the church was mature from the day of its birth. It did not come to maturity until the Holy Spirit was poured out upon it. And that makes Pentecost incomparably the most important turning point in its history. It also accounts for the fact that the glory of the church under the new dispensation is far greater than was its glory under the old.

The church of the new dispensation has a fuller revelation. Whereas the Old Testament saints had to be content with the shadow of things to come, we may walk in the full light provided by Him who is at once the Son of God, the effulgence of the Father’s glory, the express image of the Father’s being (Hebrews 1:3), and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). And it was He who on the day of Pentecost made good His promise to grant unto His church the Spirit of truth to lead it into all the truth (John 16:13).

The church of the new dispensation has a greater freedom. It is no longer in the position of a little child which needs to be told in minute detail what to do and what not to do, but it has attained majority (Galatians 4:1-7). Not only has the ceremonial law, which prescribed the worship of ancient Israel, been abolished; the liberty of the New Testament church concerns also the moral law of God. It is indeed in sacred duty bound to keep this law,