The True Church

J. C. Ryle

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The True Church

I want you to belong to the one true Church: to the Church outside of which there is no salvation. I do not ask where you go on a Sunday; I only ask, "Do you belong to the one true Church?"

Where is this one true Church? What is this one true Church like? What are the marks by which this one true Church may be known? You may well ask such questions. Give me your attention, and I will provide you with some answers.

The one true Church is composed of all believers in the Lord Jesus. It is made up of all God's elect—of all converted men and women—of all true Christians. In whomsoever we can discern the election of God the Father, the sprinkling of the blood of God the Son, the sanctifying work of God the Spirit, in that person we see a member of Christ's true Church.

It is a Church of which all the members have the same marks. They are all born again of the Spirit; they all possess "repentance towards God, faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ," and holiness of life and conversation. They all hate sin, and they all love Christ. They worship differently, and after various fashions; some worship with a form of prayer, and some with none; some worship kneeling, and some standing; but they all worship with one heart. They are all led by one Spirit; they all build upon one foundation; they all draw their religion from one single book—that is the Bible. They are all joined to one great centre—that is Jesus Christ. They all even now can say with one heart, "Hallelujah";

and they can all respond with one heart and voice, Amen and Amen.

It is a Church which is dependent upon no ministers upon earth, however much it values those who preach the Gospel to its members. The life of its members does not hang upon Church-membership, and baptism and the Lord's Supper—although they highly value these things when they are to be had. But it has one Great Head—one Shepherd, one Bishop—and that is Jesus Christ. He alone, by His Spirit, admits the members of this Church, though ministers may show the door. Till He opens the door no man on earth can open it—neither bishops, nor presbyters, nor convocations, nor synods. Once let a man repent and believe the Gospel, and that moment he becomes a member of this Church. Like the penitent thief, he may have no opportunity of being baptized; but he has that which is far better than any water-baptism—the baptism of the Spirit. He may not be able to receive the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, but he eats Christ's body and drinks Christ's blood by faith every day he lives, and no minister on earth can prevent him. He may be excommunicated by ordained men, and cut off from the outward ordinances of the professing Church; but all the ordained men in the world cannot shut him out of the true Church.

It is a Church whose existence does not depend on forms, ceremonies, cathedrals, churches, chapels, pulpits, fonts, vestments, organs, endowments, money, kings, governments, magistrates or any act of favour whatsoever from the hand of man. It has often lived on and continued when all these things have been taken from it: it has often been driven into the wilderness or into dens and caves of the earth, by those who ought to

have been its friends. Its existence depends on nothing but the presence of Christ and His Spirit; and they being ever with it, the Church cannot die.

This is the Church to which the Scriptural titles of present honour and privilege, and the promises of future glory especially belong; this is the body of Christ; this is the flock of Christ; this is the household of faith and the family of God; this is God's building, God's foundation, and the temple of the Holy Ghost; this is the Church of the first-born, whose names are written in heaven; this is the royal priesthood, the chosen generation, the peculiar people, the purchased possession, the habitation of God, the light of the world, the salt and the wheat of the earth; this is the "Holy Catholic Church" of the Apostles' Creed; this is the "One Catholic and Apostolic Church" of the Nicene Creed; this is that Church to which the Lord Jesus promises "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," and to which He says, "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. xvi. 18; xxviii. 20.)

This is the only Church which possesses true unity. Its members are entirely agreed on all the weightier matters of religion, for they are all taught by one Spirit. About God, and Christ, and the Spirit, and sin, and their own hearts, and faith, and repentance, and necessity of holiness, and the value of the Bible, and the importance of prayer, and the resurrection, and judgment to come—about all these points they are of one mind. Take three or four of them, strangers to one another, from the remotest corners of the earth; examine them separately on these points: you will find them all of one judgment.

This is the only Church which possesses true sanctity. Its members are all holy. They are not merely holy by profession, holy in name, and holy in the judgment of charity; they are all holy in act, and deed, and reality, and life, and truth. They are all more or less conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. No unholy man belongs to this Church.

This is the only Church which is truly catholic. It is not the Church of any one nation or people: its members are to be found in every part of the world where the Gospel is received and believed. It is not confined within the limits of any one country, or pent up within the pale of any particular forms or outward government. In it there is no difference between Jew and Greek, black man and white, Episcopalian and Presbyterian—but faith in Christ is all. Its members will be gathered from north, and south, and east, and west, in the last day, and will be of every name and tongue—but all one in Jesus Christ.

This is the only Church which is truly apostolic. It is built on the foundation laid by the Apostles, and holds the doctrines which they preached. The two grand objects at which its members aim, are apostolic faith and apostolic practice; and they consider the man who talks of following the Apostles without possessing these two things to be no better than sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

This is the only Church which is certain to endure unto the end. Nothing can altogether overthrow and destroy it. Its members may be persecuted, oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, beheaded, burned; but the true Church is never altogether extinguished; it rises again from its afflictions; it lives on through fire and water.

When crushed in one land it springs up in another. The Pharoahs, the Herods, the Neros, the Bloody Marys, have laboured in vain to put down this Church; they slay their thousands, and then pass away and go to their own place. The true Church outlives them all and sees them buried each in his turn. It is an anvil that has broken many a hammer in this world, and will break many a hammer still; it is a bush which is often burning, and yet is not consumed.

This is the only Church of which no one member can perish. Once enrolled in the lists of this Church, sinners are safe for eternity; they are never cast away. The election of God the Father, the continual intercession of God the Son, the daily renewing and sanctifying power of God the Holy Ghost, surround and fence them in like a garden enclosed. Not one bone of Christ's mystical body shall ever be broken; not one lamb of Christ's flock shall ever be plucked out of His hand.

This is the Church which does the work of Christ upon earth. Its members are a little flock, and few in number, compared with the children of the world: one or two here, and two or three there—a few in this parish and a few in that. But these are they who shake the universe; these are they who change the fortunes of kingdoms by their prayers; these are they who are the active workers for spreading the knowledge of pure religion and undefiled; these are the life-blood of a country, the shield, the defence, the stay, and the support of any nation to which they belong.

This is the Church which shall be truly glorious at the end. When all earthly glory is passed away then shall this Church be presented without spot before God the

Father's throne. Thrones, principalities, and powers upon earth shall come to nothing; dignities and offices, and endowments shall all pass away; but the Church of the first-born shall shine as the stars at the last, and be presented with joy before the Father's throne, in the day of Christ's appearing. When the Lord's jewels are made up, and the manifestation of the sons of God takes place, episcopacy, and presbyterianism, and congregationalism will not be mentioned; one Church only will be named, and that is the Church of the elect.

Reader, this is the true Church to which a man must belong, if he would be saved. Till you belong to this, you are nothing better than a lost soul. You may have the form, the husk, the skin, and the shell of religion, but you have not got the substance and the life. Yes; you may have countless outward privileges: you may enjoy great light, and knowledge—but if you do not belong to the body of Christ, your light, and knowledge, and privileges, will not save your soul. Alas, for the ignorance that prevails on this point! Men fancy if they join this Church or that Church, and become communicants, and go through certain forms, that all must be right with their souls. It is an utter delusion, it is a gross mistake. All were not Israel who were called Israel, and all are not members of Christ's body who profess themselves Christian. Take notice, you may be a staunch Episcopalian, or Presbyterian, or Independent, or Baptist, or Wesleyan, or Plymouth Brother—and yet not belong to the true Church. And if you do not, it will be better at last if you had never been born.

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