

CHAPTER II.

THE CHURCH A DIVINE AND SPIRITUAL INSTITUTION.

ALTHOUGH it is with the Church invisible,—the whole body of the elect vitally united to the Saviour,—that the idea of a Church begins, yet, in proceeding to investigate into the form, ordinances, and government of the Christian society, we shall find it necessary to view the Church mainly, if not exclusively, in its character as a visible society. To the Church visible belong the privileges, the character, the order, about which it is our duty to inquire. Our future discussions, therefore, will consist in an examination of the nature, powers, and ordinances of the Christian society as an outward and visible institute, standing in a certain external relation to Christ,—whether you regard it as universal or local, as an association made up of many congregations under one government, or an association represented by its office-bearers and rulers.

What, then, are the primary characteristics of the Christian society, made up of the professing disciples of the Saviour in this world?

I. In the first place, the Church is a Divine institution, owing its origin not to man, but to Christ, and associated together not in consequence of human arrangement, but by Christ's appointment.

No doubt there is a foundation laid in the very nature of the religion which Christ came to promulgate, for the union of His disciples in one body or society. The faith which each man holds for the salvation of his own soul is a faith which joins him to every other believer. The close and mysterious union which is constituted by faith between him and his Saviour, is a union that connects him through that Saviour with every other Christian. In becoming one with Christ, he becomes at the same time, in a certain sense, one with all who are Christ's. The spiritual fellowship that a believer enjoys with his Redeemer, is not a solitary or

a selfish joy, but one which he cannot possess alone, or except in common with other believers. It is the very nature, therefore, of the Gospel to be not a solitary religion, but a social one. When Christ, through the mighty operation of His Spirit, brings a sinner into reconciliation and communion with Himself, He ushers him also into the fellowship of reconciliation and communion with all other Christians. When the work of grace is done upon the soul of man, and the barriers of separation between him and his Saviour are cast down, and the sinner who was afar off is brought near to God, the very same work of grace removes the obstacles that hindered his union with other men; and in the fellowship of one faith and one Lord he discovers a new and mightier bond of attachment and union to his fellow-believers. Were there no positive command or appointment, therefore, requiring Christians to unite together and to form on earth a society joined together by the profession of the same faith, the very nature of Christianity would force such a result. In the profession of it in common, men would find themselves insensibly drawn to other believing men with a power not to be resisted; and in the bonds of the same Saviour and the same Spirit they would feel and own a nearer tie than that of kindred, and a holier relationship than one of blood. In the common joys and sorrows which Christians, and none but Christians, share,—in the one faith and one Saviour in which together they rejoice,—in the same hopes and fears, the same sin escaped, and the same salvation won, in which they participate, there is a union of the most intimate kind produced and cemented, which is not with them a matter of choice, but a matter of inevitable necessity.

We may assert, therefore, that that Christian society which we call the Church of Christ is a society framed by Divine appointment, even did we see in it nothing more than a body of men brought together by the constraint of the same faith and same affections wrought in them by the Spirit of God. But there is much more than this intimated in Scripture, on which we ground the assertion that the Church of Christ is a divinely instituted society. There are express commands in Scripture, leaving the believer no alternative in the matter, and requiring him to unite together with other believers in the outward and public profession of his faith before the world. He is not left at liberty to hide that faith within his own heart, and himself to

remain alone and separated from his fellow-believers. It is the office of the Christian society to be a witness, by means of an outward and public profession, for Christ on the earth; and it is not a matter of choice, but of express obligation, with a Christian man to join with others in that public profession. The command is "to confess Christ before men;"¹ and upon the ground of that command, then, is laid the foundation of a society, each member of which is called upon, whether he will or will not, to lift up a public testimony for his Saviour jointly with other believers; and that public profession is one to be made not merely with the lips, uniting with others in a common declaration of the faith believed. The outward ordinances of the Christian society are so framed and devised as to be themselves a significant profession of faith on the part of those who join in them; and communion in ordinances is with Christians not a matter of choice, but of express command. Christ has judged it proper to appoint that His disciples shall be solemnly received into His Church by the initiatory rite of baptism; so that the very entrance of life, or, at all events, the admission into the Christian society, shall be itself a public testimony to Him. He has enjoined the public and open commemoration of the central and most characteristic doctrine of His faith, by the celebration, at stated intervals, of the Lord's Supper; and as often as the first day of the week returns, the disciples are commanded "not to forsake the assembling of themselves together," but to unite in the outward and joint worship of the Saviour. In short, in the whole divinely appointed institutions and ordinances of the Christian society we see the provision made for, and the obligation laid upon, His disciples to be joined together into one outward body, and to form a common society of professing believers. That community is one, therefore, of Divine institution; and in the duty laid upon them, not as a matter of choice, but of express command, to become members of it, we see the ordinance of God for the existence and permanent establishment of a Church on earth. A solitary Christian is seen to be a contradiction in terms, if you view merely his faith as a principle of affinity naturally destined to draw to it the faith of other believers. A solitary Christian is worse than a contradiction, he is an anomaly, standing out against the express institution of God, which has appointed the fellowship of believers in one Church,

¹ Matt. x. 32; Luke xii. 8; John xii. 42; Rom. x. 9.

and made provision in its outward ordinances for their union and edification. The Christian society is a kingdom, set up by express Divine appointment, and differs from every other society on earth in this remarkable fact, that the builder and maker of it is God.

The institution of a society by Christ under the name of a Church, and the establishment and permanent continuance of that society as a Divine institution in the midst of this world, is a fact of fundamental importance in all our future inquiries. That fact stands opposed to the views of two distinct classes of men, who, differing in their opinion as to the origin and nature of the Christian society, yet combine in denying or setting aside its claims to be regarded as of Christ, and owing its appointment to a Divine authority.

1st. There are those who regard the Christian Church simply as a human society, owing its origin and establishment to voluntary agreement among its members.

Of course the idea of a merely voluntary association of Christians, brought together by the common belief of the same doctrines and the common practice of the same precepts, is totally opposed to the notion of a Divine institution, claiming to be of God, and appealing to His authority for its existence and outward establishment on the earth. If the principles already laid down are correct, the theory which makes the Church to be a merely human and voluntary association of Christians must come very far short indeed of what the statements of Scripture demand. No doubt there is in the very nature of Christianity, viewed as a system of truth and duty, apart from any mention of a Christian Church, enough to have laid the foundations of a society voluntarily brought together among the men who should have embraced it. In the fellowship of one faith uniting them to each other, and separating them from the rest of the world,—in the observance of the same worship and religious ordinances as a distinguishing mark of their Christianity,—there was enough, even without an express appointment to that effect, to have gathered the Christians of the early ages into one body, and to have led them voluntarily to unite themselves into a distinct society. More than that may perhaps be conceded to those who view the Christian Church as nothing beyond a voluntary association. Three things seem essential to the very idea of

a society, whatever be its character or proposed objects. Men brought voluntarily together into any association are necessarily led, for the purpose of order and the better attainment of the common aim that unites them, to appoint officers of some kind or other, to enact laws or regulations for the transaction of business, and to exercise the right of admission or exclusion in regard to members. All this is implied in the very nature of a regular and organized society, whether voluntary or not; and no community can long exist without it. It may be granted, then, in the case of the Christian society, that the power of a common faith, and the affinity of a common worship, would have been enough, without express Divine appointment, to have brought the believers into one; and further, that the very necessities of the society so constituted would have led them to adopt a form of order and government for it, apart from a positive institution by Christ. But all this furnishes no presumption against the fact of the positive appointment of the Christian society by Christ. Over and above the general tendency of the Gospel to become a social system, and over and above the general sanction of a Christian society implied in that tendency, Christ expressly laid down the main principles of order and government for the formation of His Church. He did not wait for the historical development of the Christian society, or leave His disciples to organize for themselves its system of government and office-bearers and laws: He laid upon His disciples the express injunction to meet together in His name; and in order the better to enforce it, annexed the promise, that when they were thus assembled, He would be in the midst of them to bless them and to do them good.¹ He commended to them the duty of confessing Him before men; and the more surely to prevent mistake, appointed certain public ordinances, such as Baptism and the Lord's Supper, through which that confession was to be made. He warned them "not to forsake the assembling of themselves together;"² and, to provide against uncertainty and misapprehension, He appointed one day in seven for this meeting, and instituted the ordinance of public worship for their observance. He commissioned the first office-bearers in His Church, He gave them the power of ruling, and He prescribed the terms for the admission of members. In all this there is evinced or implied

¹ Matt. xviii. 20; Exod. xx. 24.

² Heb. x. 25.

the positive institution of a society by Christ Himself; having from Him a Divine authority. The voluntary power of association, implied in Christianity as a social system, is *there*, and is not by any means to be denied or overlooked; but, over and above that, the Christian society has the sanction and authority of a Divine appointment.

(2d.) There are those who regard the Christian Church as a society created by the State, owing its form and existence to those regulations which the State may enact in regard to it.

The Erastian theory of the Church is no less directly opposed to the claims of the Church as a Divine institution than the theory of a merely voluntary association. If, however, the principles already enunciated be correct, they may absolve us from the necessity of entering into details in the consideration of such a system. If there be warrant in Scripture for asserting that Christ has not merely lent a general sanction to the formation of a Christian society among His followers, but, as if to prevent the possibility of mistake, has specified in His own words Himself, or by His inspired servants, its office-bearers, its laws, and its ordinances, then *this* is enough to set aside by anticipation the Erastian scheme. In virtue of the appointment of its Divine Head, the Church has an existence, an authority, a government, totally independent of any power which it may or may not derive from the State; and the Church actually exercised the rights resulting from its Divine institution, and conferred by Christ, both in the times of the apostles and in subsequent ages, when it received no gift from the State except the gift of persecution and of blood. It is not necessary, at this stage of the discussion, to anticipate the inquiry which will afterwards meet us, as to the extent of the power or the form of government appointed by Christ for the Christian society. It is enough for our present argument to know that some kind of authority does belong to the Church in virtue of its original appointment by our Lord; that as it existed at first independently of the favour of the State, and in the face of its hostility, so it may continue to exist without any external connection or support; and that, for all the purposes on account of which it was established, it has powers complete and entire within itself, the original gift and permanent endowment of its Head. As a Divine institution, designed for a continued existence on earth, the Church is divinely equipped with all the

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powers necessary for its own being and welfare, without owing anything to man. Without doing more than merely glance at the argument at present, it is enough to say that the Erastian theory proceeds upon the mistake of identifying the Church and State, and denying those essential differences between them, which demonstrate them to be distinct and separate ordinances of God, having each an independent existence. Apart altogether from the direct evidence we have in Scripture for the Divine institution of the Church, as a society owing nothing to the State and everything to Christ, the differences between the two prove them to be independent of each other. They differ in their origin, in their objects, and in the means by which those objects are attained. They differ in their origin,—the State being the ordinance of God as universal sovereign, and appointed for all nations whether Christian or not; the Church being the ordinance of Christ as Mediator, and appointed only for those nations among whom Christianity is professed. They differ in their objects,—the State being intended to advance directly the secular interests of the nation, and only indirectly to promote its spiritual well-being; the Church, on the contrary, being designed directly to further the spiritual interests of its members, and only indirectly to contribute to their temporal or secular wellbeing. They differ in their means for attaining the ends they have respectively in view,—the State being armed with the power of the sword for securing its object; the Church, on the other hand, being armed with weapons not carnal but spiritual. These, and other essential differences between the Church and the State, evince that they are separate and independent institutions of God, and that the one cannot owe its existence or authority to the other.

So much, then, for the general fact that the Christian society is a Divine institution, owing its existence not to man, but to Christ, and not merely a voluntary association, or the creature of civil appointment.

II. In the second place I remark, the Church of Christ is a spiritual institution; or, in other words, in its primary character it is a spiritual instrumentality for working out the spiritual good of man.

The Christian Church which Christ established on the earth before He left it, is the last of the dispensations of God; and, in

a peculiar sense, it is the dispensation of the Spirit. The earthly and carnal elements of former dispensations were step by step removed, in order to make way for one more spiritual and inward, and fitted to minister, by a more entirely spiritual agency, to the souls of men. The era of the Christian Church is emphatically that of the manifestation of the Spirit; and the administration of the Church is, in its primary character, a spiritual one. No doubt, in the New Testament Church, there are still found outward ordinances, and an outward service,—an external provision made by rites and solemnities, that minister to the senses, for the edification of the body of Christ. Perhaps it is necessarily implied in the very condition of sense and sight in which Christians are in this world, that the Church should not be wholly without such external provision, and that the Spirit of Christ should minister to our spirits, not directly, but through the medium of the outward word and the outward ordinance; but in its main character, the administration of the Spirit through the Church is a spiritual one, to the exclusion of observances wholly outward, and influences purely external. The written word is no doubt an outward sign, speaking, in the first instance, to the eye; but it is the truth in the letter, and not the letter itself—that is, the spiritual instrument—that operates upon the soul. The external ordinance of Baptism or the Lord's Supper is no doubt an outward provision, ministering, in the first instance, to the senses; but it is not the sensible signs themselves, but the thing signified, that becomes, in the hand of the Spirit, the spiritual seal upon the soul. Even in the use of outward ordinances, the Church employs an instrumentality not wholly outward, but one capable of exerting a spiritual power upon the conscience and the heart. The ordinance is but the avenue through which the Spirit of God more powerfully reaches to the spirit of man. There is no virtue and no power in the outward action or the sensible sign in itself, and apart from the Spirit of God, conveyed through it to the human soul. Even in the employment of an external provision for the good of her members, the Church does not employ a mere external power; her primary influence is an influence of a spiritual kind, conveyed through the channel of outward ordinances; and her great ministration is, when the Spirit in the ordinance meets with the spirit in the heart, and they become one in the believer. It is, then, the distinguishing characteristic of the Church in these

latter days, that her administration is spiritual in its nature and its aims; that although making use of outward ordinances, the influence operating upon the soul is not outward, but spiritual; and that the administration of this kingdom is altogether different from that of the kingdoms of the world.

The standing ordinance of a spiritual Church in the world, distinct in its origin, in its objects, in its instrumentality, from the kingdoms of this world, is the grand and public lesson taught by God as to the fundamental distinction between things civil and things spiritual. To draw the line of demarcation between the province of the one and the other, is the great problem that involves in it the question of freedom of conscience on the one side, and the rights of the State on the other,—the spiritual liberty of the Church, and the legitimate authority of the civil magistrate,—the things that belong unto God, and the things that belong unto Cæsar. The grand fact, that Christ has instituted a spiritual society on the earth, and destined it to be perpetual, is one never to be lost sight of, as affording a solution, and the only possible solution, of these questions. The identification of this spiritual society in any manner or degree with the civil society, the annulling or confounding of the essential distinction between the Christian Church on the one hand, and the civil State on the other, involves in it errors equally detrimental to both. The Erastian theory is guilty of this error, when it makes the Church the creature and portion of the State,—thereby confounding two ordinances of God, essentially distinct and separate. But the very same error is committed in a somewhat different manner by the theory of the late Dr. Arnold, where he affirms that, “in a country where the nation or government are avowedly and essentially Christian, the State or nation is virtually the Church.”¹

¹ Arnold, *Fragment on the Church*, Lond. 1845, p. 177, 2d ed. In the circumstance alluded to, “The State becomes transformed into the Church; the spirit of the Church is transfused into a more perfect body, and its former external organization dies away. . . . What was a kingdom of the world, is become a kingdom of Christ,—a portion of the Church, in the high and spiritual sense of the term; but in that sense in which ‘Church’ denotes the outward and social organization of Christians in any one place, it is no longer a Christian Church, but, what is far higher and better, a Christian kingdom.” “It is changed into a better and purer self, like Kailyal, when she had tasted the Amreeta cup of immortality.” See also pp. 221–228, and *Postscript to Principles of Church Reform*, 1833, pp. 18–28, 3d ed. [Theories regarding the ultimate identity of Church and State, of a nature closely kindred to the views now referred to, were widely spread on the Continent about the time when

According to such a system, the State and the Church are, under certain circumstances, identical, quite as much as on the theory of Erastians; although, according to Arnold, this identity is brought about by the State merging its own existence in and becoming part of the Church; while, according to the other system, it is accomplished in the opposite way, of the Church merging its own existence in and becoming part of the State. In neither system is that grand and fundamental distinction recognised which God has set before our eyes so prominently in the fact of the ordination by Himself of the two separate and independent societies,—the one for spiritual, and the other for civil purposes; and the forgetfulness of which inevitably leads to errors ruinous on the one side or the other. Deny or ignore that distinction, and there is no

Arnold wrote. Thus, for instance, Hegel defines “the State” as “the real embodiment of the ethical idea.” “The State is the Divine will, as a present spirit, unfolding itself to the actual form and organization of a world.” “Religion,” again, “is the relation to the absolute in the form of sentiment, imagination, faith.”—Hegel’s *Werke*, Berlin 1833, 8ter Band, *Rechtsphilosophie*, §§ 257–270.

Both the Church and State, he goes on to remark, have to do with truth and morality; there is only a difference of form between them (p. 342). “Wenn die wesentliche Einheit derselben (State and Church) ist die der Wahrheit, der Grundsätze, und Gesinnung, so ist es ebenso wesentlich dass mit dieser Einheit der Unterschied, den sie in der Form ihres Bewusstseins haben, zur besondern Existenz gekommen sei” (p. 345). Hegel, therefore, while recognising a certain distinction between Church and State as desirable or necessary to be kept up, at least in present circumstances (pp. 346, 349), did not draw the line of demarcation very deeply or decidedly; and Strauss, following out Hegel’s principles on this, as on many other points, with great boldness and with characteristic clearness and precision of expression, discards the distinction altogether. According to him, with every step which the State makes towards perfection, the Church becomes more and more useless. It is a mere “crutch of the State,” which may, and should, be thrown away. Strauss, *Christl. Glaubenslehre*, ii. 618 ff.

By Rothe, again, Hegel’s views have been developed in a rather different shape, and in a very elaborate and able way. The religious element, he holds, is essential to morality; and morality only corresponds to its idea in so far as it is piety as well. In the normal state of things, therefore, the moral community, i.e. the State, is essentially and absolutely a religious community. Until, however, this full moral development be attained, the moral community must supplement itself by one specially religious, i.e. the Church, or community of piety purely as such. The latter must, and will, retire and dissolve, in proportion as the former rises and expands into its true ideal, the kingdom of God, or Theocracy. “Der vollendete Staat schliesst die Kirche schlechthin aus.” Rothe, *Anfänge der christl. Kirche*, Wittenberg 1837, §§ 5, 6 ff.; *Theologische Ethik*, i. 418 f.; ii. 145 f.; iii. 1009–1125. Comp. Nitzsch’s criticism of this theory, *System der christl. Lehre*, § 198. Comp. also Coleridge’s theory of a “National Church” or “Clerisy,” “in relation to which Christianity or the Church of Christ is a blessed accident,” etc.; *Constitution of the Church and State*, Lond. 1830, pp. 49 ff., 67, 145 ff., 2d ed.]

security remaining against either the State becoming the tyrant of the Church, or the Church the tyrant of the State,—against a civil supremacy over the conscience which would trample all spiritual freedom in the dust, or an ecclesiastical usurpation over our temporal rights that would lay all civil liberty in ruins. In the Divine institution of a spiritual society, distinct from and independent of the State, God has taught before our eyes the grand and vitally important lesson of the fundamental distinction between things civil and things spiritual; and has made provision that the Christian Church, His own appointment, shall never become either the tyrant or the slave of the kingdoms of men.

CHAPTER III.

THE CHURCH IN ITS TWOFOLD CHARACTER AS VISIBLE
AND INVISIBLE.

IN attempting, as has been already done, to ascertain the various meanings of the term Church in Scripture, I had occasion to speak of the distinction between the Church invisible and the Church visible. That distinction is so important in itself, and involves in it principles so fundamental in respect to our future discussions, that it may be desirable to inquire into the grounds and nature of it at somewhat greater length. To this subject the present chapter will more especially be devoted.

Now, at the outset, it is not unimportant to remark, that when we speak of the Church invisible and the Church visible, we are not to be understood as if we referred in these designations to two separate and distinct Churches, but rather to the same Church under two different characters. We do not assert that Christ has founded two Churches on earth, but only one; and we affirm that that *one* Church is to be regarded under two distinct aspects. As the Church invisible, it consists of the whole number of the elect, who are vitally united to Christ the Head, and of none other. As the Church visible, it consists of all those who profess the faith of Christ, together with their children. There are many things which can be affirmed of the Church of Christ under the one aspect, which cannot be affirmed of it under the other; and it is most important that the distinction be kept in view, in order to a right understanding of the declarations of Scripture in regard to the Church. There are two things, the statement of which may serve to exhibit and define the difference between the Church invisible and the Church visible.

1st. The Church invisible stands, with respect to its members, in an inward and spiritual relationship to Christ, whereas the Church visible stands to Him in an outward relationship only.