

“I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (Mt 16:18)

✠ Lecture I: The Doctrine of The Church ✠

The assembly in the Old Testament (Heb. *Koheleth*) is translated ‘*ekklesia*’ in Greek, which we translate as ‘church’. The Christian doctrine of the Church is referred to as ‘ecclesiology’. The word ‘church’ signifies the following meanings:

1. The Church as a Building:

We understand the Church as the holy place designed and intended for collective or public worship, just as was the temple in the Old Testament. With this meaning we encounter the Church in many places of Holy Scripture:

- “So it was that for a whole year they assembled **in the church** and taught a great many people” (**Acts 11:26**) → While the KJV has translated this verse “with the church”, the original text actually reads “in the church”. In fact, this how the Arabic translation reads.
- “... As I teach everywhere **in every church**” (**1Cor 4:17**)
- “Yet **in the church** I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue” (**1Cor 14:19**)
- “Let your women keep silent **in the churches**, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says” (**1Cor 14:34**)
- “I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself **in the house of God, which is the church** of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (**1Tim 3:15**)

✠ Comments:

The Church, as the place of worship, is called the “house of God” (**1Tim 3:15; Heb 10:21**). The first time Holy Scripture mentions this term was in the Holy Book of Genesis when our father Jacob said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!” (**Gen 28:17**). We need to realize that going to Church is a gift from God and say with King David, “As for me, I will come into your house in the multitude of Your mercy” (**Ps 5:7**). Indeed, “Blessed are those who dwell in Your house (O God); they will still be praising You. For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wickedness” (**Ps 84:4-10**), “I was glad when they said to me, ‘let us go to the house of the Lord’” (**Ps 122:1**). Can we say, “One thing I have desired of the Lord, that I will seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple” (**Ps 27:4**)?

God is Omnipresent and King Solomon prayed on the day of the dedication of the temple saying, “But will God indeed dwell on earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built!” (**1Kings 8:27**). The Church is called the house of God because of His presence in it. Once you acknowledge this fact, your conduct in the Church will change and you will understand the words of King David, “Holiness adorns Your house, O Lord, forever” (**Ps 93:5**), or else the Lord will say to you, “My house is a house of prayer but you have made it a den of thieves” (**Lk 19:46**).

2. The Church as a Congregation:

According to the Alexandrian fathers, the Church is not a human organization, but a divine fellowship of repented sinners who trust in the Savior and enjoy unity with Him and also unity with each other in Him, through the Holy Spirit. (Fr. Tadros Malaty, *The Coptic Orthodox Church and The Dogmas: The Church*)

- “And the Lord added **to the church** daily those who were being saved” (**Acts 2:47**)
- “At that time a great persecution arose **against the church** which was at Jerusalem” (**Acts 8:1**)
- “Then news of these things came to **the ears of the church** in Jerusalem” (**Acts 11:22**)
- “Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him **by the church**” (**Acts 12:5**)

- “Now when they had come and **gathered the church together**, they reported all that God had done with them” (**Acts 14:27**)
- “And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and **greeted the church**, he went down to Antioch” (**Acts 18:22**)

✠ Comments:

The Church (congregation) of the New Testament has inherited **all** the blessings of the Old Testament Church. In fact, the New Testament Church is the extension of the Old Testament one, St. Paul describes the Old Testament Church saying, “to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises” (**Rom 9:4**), he then confirms that these privileges and gifts had been transferred to the New Testament Church, “Therefore, having these promises...” (**2Cor 7:1**)

Origen said: “I would not have you suppose that “the bride of Christ” (**Rev 21:2**) or the Church is spoken of only after the coming of the Savior in the flesh, but rather from the beginning of the human race, from the very foundation of the world; nay, I may follow St. Paul in tracing the origin of this mystery even further, before the foundation of the world. For St. Paul says, “He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy” (**Eph 1:4**). The Apostle also says that the Church is built on the foundation not only of apostles but also prophets (**Eph 2:20**). Now Adam is numbered among the prophets, and he prophesied concerning the great mystery in respect of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Church when he said, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (**Gen 2:24**). For the Apostle is clearly speaking of these words when he says, “This (matrimony) is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (**Eph 5:32**). Further, the Apostle also says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word” (**Eph 5:25**), and in this he shows that it is not the case that she did not exist before. For how could He love her if she did not exist? Without doubt she existed in all the saints who had been from the beginning of time. Thus, loving the Church, He came to her. And as His “children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same” (**Heb 2:14**) and gave Himself for them. For these saints were the Church, which He loved so as to increase it in number, to improve it with virtues, and to by the charity of perfection transfer her from earth to heaven”

Consequently, St. Paul says, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and **church** of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (**Heb 12:22-23**). Here the Apostle is speaking concerning the **invisible victorious Church in heaven**, which includes the spirits of the saints and also the angels as members.

3. The Church as a Hierarchy:

Our Lord said, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother, but if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established’ and if he refuses to hear them, **tell it to the church**. But if he refuses even to hear **the church**, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.” (**Mt 18:16-17**) The term ‘Church’ here signifies the Church’s leadership and not the whole congregation. Therefore, our Lord said to the apostles immediately after that, “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (**Mt 18:18**). St. Paul said, “He Himself gave **some** (not all) to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (**Eph 4:11-12**) → “**His body, which is the church**” (**Col 1:24**) → “For in fact the body is not one member but many... And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body” (**1Cor 12:14-20**)

✠ Comments:

The Church, as a congregation, is a theocratic [Gr. *Theos*, God + *Kratos*, power] community, which is governed by clergy ruling through divine authority. The people are likened to sheep and the overseers (bishops) as pastors and shepherds:

- “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (**Acts 20:28**)
- “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (**1Pet 5:2-3**)

This theocratic system is as old as the Old Testament, therefore St. Paul said, “no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was” (**Heb 5:4**). This authority was given to the apostles from the Lord Himself (**Mt 18:18; Jn 20:23**) and they gave it to their successors as St. Paul said to his disciple Timothy, the Bishop of Ephesus:

- “Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership” (**1Tim 4:14**)
- “Stir up the gift of God which is in you through he laying of my hands” (**2Tim 1:6**)

It takes a great deal of humility faith and love from the shepherds (bishops and priests) and the sheep (congregation) for this theocratic system to succeed. We all need to realize that Theocracy and Democracy are two different systems; God in His wisdom chose that the former would rule His Church.

- “I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction” (**2Cor 13:10**)
- “I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you” (**Gal 4:20**)

St. Paul exhorts us saying:

- “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct” (**Heb 13:7**)
- “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you” (**Heb 13:18**)

4. The Family as a Church:

St. Paul said concerning Priscilla and Aquila, “Greet the church that is in their house” (**Rom 16:5**), “Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house” (**1Cor 16:19**).

✠ Comments:

The house of this blessed family was considered a church as our Lord promised, “For where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (**Mt 18:20**). St. Timothy’s family was indeed a church as St. Paul testifies, “I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also” (**2Tim 1:5**).
