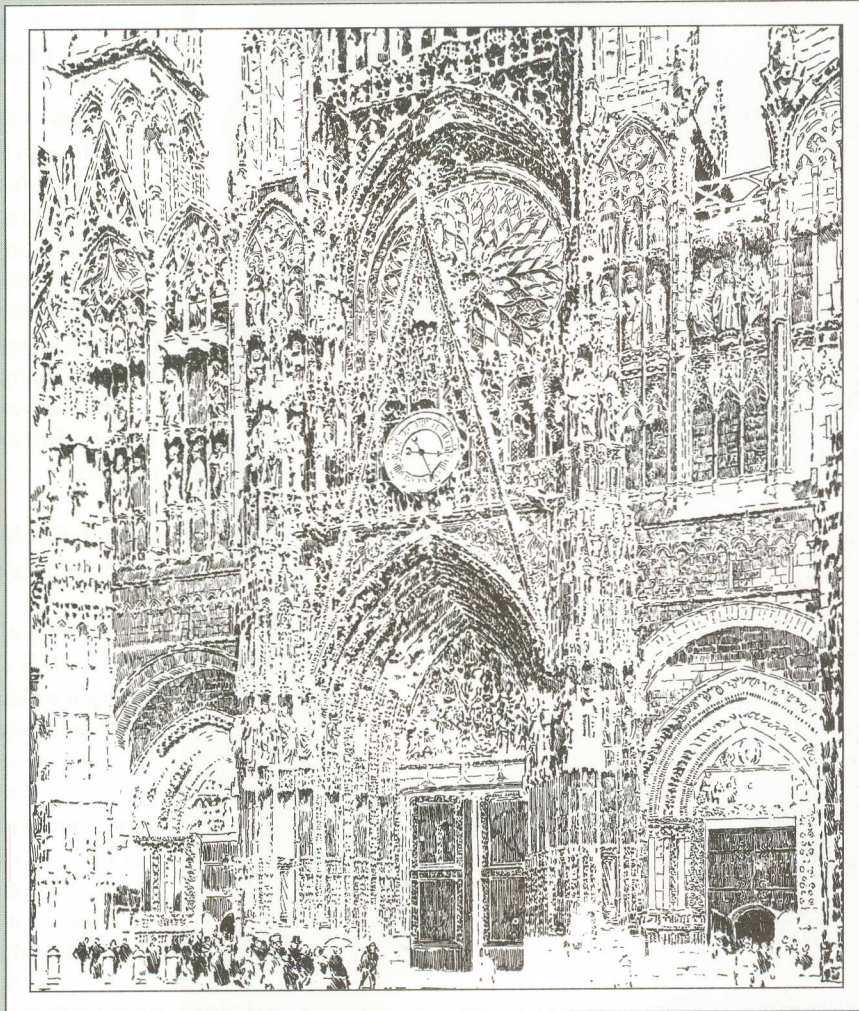


The One True Church

by Desmond Ford

*When you trust in Christ you become a member of the True Church.
The True Church is the church invisible that includes all
people—from all ages—who believe the gospel.
Against this church Satan can never prevail.*



Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18 KJV)

What a prediction! What a claim!
What a classic statement!

Here we are almost twenty centuries later, and about one in three people around the globe claims membership in Christ's church.

Church Description

Yet almost everyone realizes that the

professing church today is not the glorious reality sketched in the symbolism of Old Testament Scripture:

Who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession? (Song of Songs 6:10 NIV.)

Nor has the church ever fulfilled this description. Consider the New Testament picture:

A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her

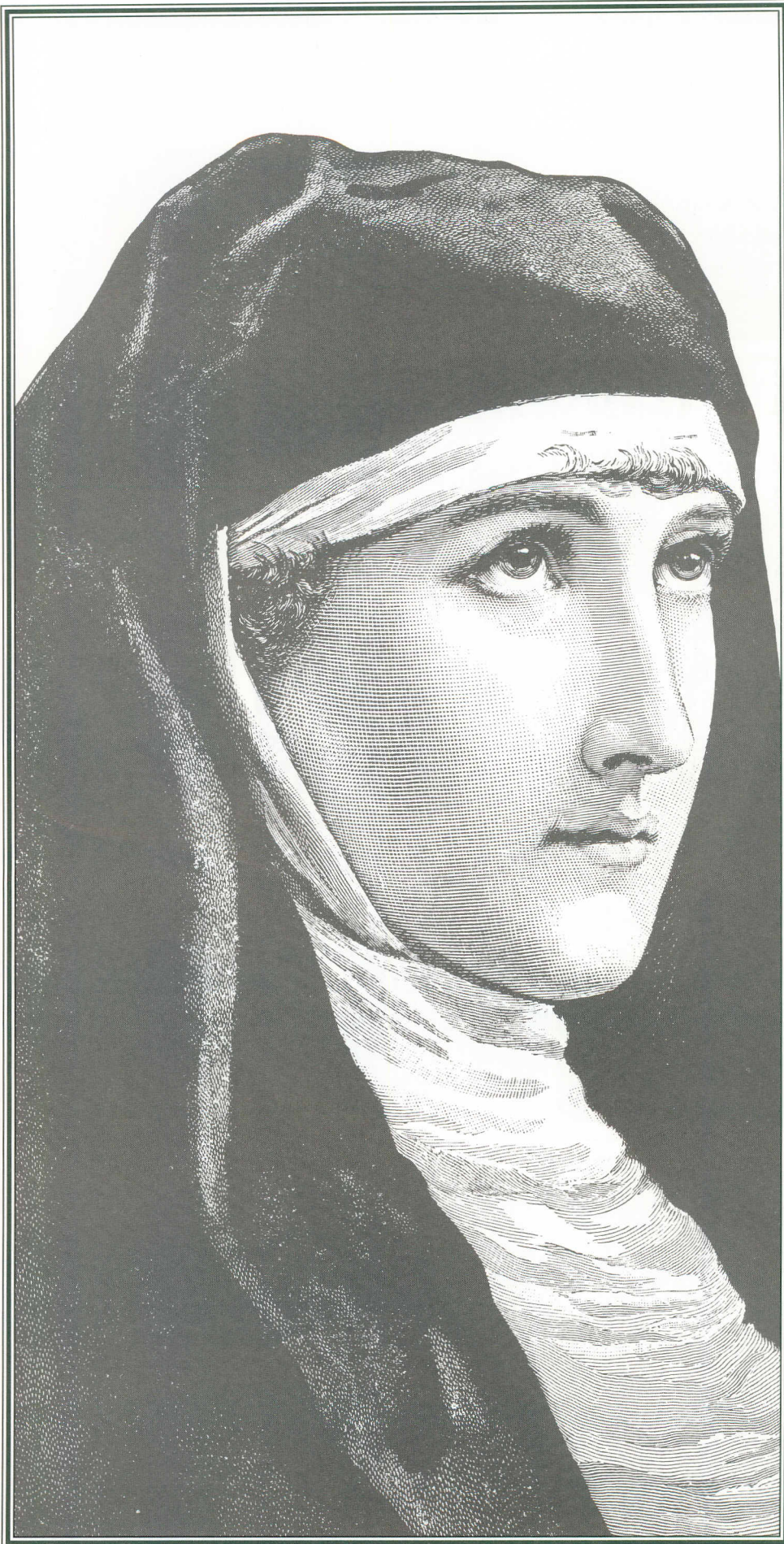
feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. (Revelation 12:1)

Church History

What a variegated, multicolored history the church has had! What a variety of flags she has flown!

Sometimes she has marched against the evils of the age, as in the first century. At other times, she has marched against members of her own body, as during the Dark Ages.

In the early days of the United



States, because the church marched against her own, only Maryland was safe for Roman Catholics.

Church Saints

What august saints the church has held in her heart!

Paul. Peter (and the other apostles).

The host of Jewish priests obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

The many women of the first century who often grace the New Testament honor rolls. (See, for example, Luke 23:49 and 24:1-11; John 19:25-27 and 20:1-2.)

Francis of Assisi; Francis Xavier; Martin Luther; John Knox; John Calvin; John and Charles Wesley; George Whitefield; William Wilberforce; William Carey; Cardinal Francis Newman; George Müller; David Livingstone; William and Catherine Booth; Charles Spurgeon; Hudson Taylor; Thomas Barnado; Mary Slessor.

In our own day there are Mother Teresa, Billy Graham—and unnamed millions.

Church Battles

What battles the church has engaged in!

The battle against emperor worship, as well as against infanticide and ignorance, impurity and intemperance. The battles against all manner of soul- and body-destroying practices.

Sadly, at times, because of tradition, the battle against other human beings! (Human beings made in the image of God.)

The church has shown great heroism. Remember the millions of martyrs. The church has shown great cowardice. She did little to stay the Holocaust.

She bravely opposed tyrannous states. We have the witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller against Hitler.

Too often, however, she has been in league with blood-guilty governments—as in our own times.

Sometimes the church has proclaimed what the consciences of most hearers are forced to acknowledge: love has supremacy over hate, purity over impurity, and truth over lies.

At other times, the church has warred over shibboleths with little

meaning for suffering multitudes. Consider the disparate hallmarks of varying denominations through the years.

Church Victorious

How could Christ say that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church? Have they not done so a thousand thousand times?

No. They haven't.

The picture in Matthew 16:18 is that of an advancing kingdom of God converging on the gates of hell and death and error and bloody persecution.

The picture is that of a victorious army, clothed in righteousness. Its banner is the Spirit, lifting high the blessed gospel of Christ. Light scatters darkness and life banishes death.

"Not in my lifetime," you say.

Wait. Think.

Great Ideas from the Church

Where did the idea of the worth of a single person come from? It is the basis for democracy and most human law.

Where did the idea that the truth makes people free come from? It is the basis for education for all.

Where did the idea of obligation to the less fortunate come from? It underlies much of the advanced social legislation of the twentieth century.

Where? From the church!

Before Jesus came to earth, there were, so to speak, no women or children. It is only since Christ was born in Bethlehem that we see heaven in the eyes of a pure woman or a little child. Before that, they were property to be disposed of by the stronger, more brutal, sex.

By far, the majority of philanthropic ventures, hospitals, ministries to slaves, orphans, and the downtrodden, have sprung from Christian compassion. They sprang often from hearts cultivated in homes that taught such mercy.

The values that make our lives livable today had their origins in Christian hearts. Yet, many of the Christian 'flowers' we see today are 'cut flowers.' They shall perish. People who hold Christian values, while denying their true Origin—Christ—shall live to see an inevitable decline in public and private life. A pervasive sterility and bar-

renness will steal across our land.

Spiritually Seen

Christ once said that the only people who can truly see are those 'born again' (John 3:3). He warned that "the flesh counts for nothing" (John 6:63).

Jesus was the best example of that principle. When people looked at him, there was "no beauty or majesty to attract [them] to him, nothing in his appearance that [they] should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2).

This was especially true during his humiliation in Pilate's judgment hall. Christ's divinity was veiled so that only unseen spiritual realities would draw us to him.

The apostle Paul knew the Master's teaching very well. Paul wrote that as believers "we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen" (2 Corinthians 4:18). This is the way—the only way—we can see the church. For the true church is the church invisible.

The Invisible and Visible Church

We must never confuse the church invisible of Matthew 16:18 with today's visible churches.

Scripture tells us concerning the church, "There is one body" (Ephesians 4:4, compare 1 Corinthians 12:12). The church of Christ must not be confused with denominations. The New Testament knows nothing about denominations. (Except perhaps in 1 Corinthians 1:12-17. There Paul decries "divisions" within the body.)

We must be sure to distinguish between God-ordained movements and denominations.

God was in the Apostolic movement, the Reformation, the Methodist revival, the true social gospel of The Salvation Army, and the Advent movement of the nineteenth century. (The Advent movement revived the long-forgotten biblical teaching that Christ would return **before** the millennium.)

But not one of the movements on its own is to be seen as the church.

The church includes **all** the martyrs from Stephen on. The church includes **all** the missionaries of every group who have longed to spread the good news. It includes **all** the philanthropists whose hearts have burned for suffering men and women, the pur-

chase of the blood of Christ. It includes **any** soul of any denomination who has ever crowned Jesus as Savior and Lord—whether they are Catholic or Protestant, charismatic or not, dispensationalist or not.

All the movements God raised up are part of the church of Christ. They are not, on their own, that church.

Evil Can Never Prevail

Against the church of Christ invisible, evil can never prevail.

But evil has prevailed against many visible churches. Notice Christ's solemn warnings in Revelation 2 and 3. The warnings are to visible churches. Their candlesticks will be removed. This means the eternal loss of most of their members. Only a remnant would endure unto eternal life.

We are not to confuse visible churches with the church invisible.

What the Church Is

A.H. Strong wrote:

The church of Christ, in its larger signification, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth.... In this sense the church is ... that redeemed humanity in which God in Christ exercises actual spiritual dominion (John 3:3, 5).¹

Strong offers another beautiful paragraph worthy of much meditation:

In their loftiest moods of inspiration, the Catholic Thomas à Kempis, the Puritan Milton, the Anglican Keble, rose above their peculiar tenets, and above the limits that divide denominations, into the higher regions of a common Christianity. It was the Baptist Bunyan who taught the world that there was "a common ground of communion which no difference of external rites could efface." It was the Moravian Gambold who wrote, "The man/ That could surround the sum of things, and spy/ The heart of God and secrets of his empire,/ Would speak but love. With love, the bright result/ Would change the hue of intermediate things, and make one thing of all theology."²

Invisible and Local Church

Romans 16:5 speaks of “the church that meets at their house.”

This is how it works. Wherever there is a core of regenerate believers gathered, the church invisible takes local and temporal form. Many Scriptures so signify. 3

Patrick Fairbairn has written well on this topic:

An assembly of the called, or of Christians, viewed in relation to Christ, its heavenly king, present by his Spirit wherever two or three are gathered in his name, Matt 18:20; and viewed also in relation to its structure, which is that of an organized body and not of a collection of atoms without mutual dependence and a common end, 1 Cor 12, was fitly called *kuriakon* (kirche, kirk, church), as a palace or building in which the Lord, by his Spirit, resides. Eph 2:22.⁴

If the church then be, in its idea, a community of those who are in vital union with Christ, and under the influence of his Spirit, it is obvious why we cannot identify it, under this aspect, with the aggregate of local Christian societies in the world. For we know, both from the prophetic announcements of Christ himself, and from experience, that every visible church is like a field containing tares mixed with the wheat; containing, that is, many who, though by profession Christians, are not members of Christ, nor led by his Spirit, but who cannot at present be separated from external communion with true believers. These are not really of the church, that is, of the church in its truth; but are accidentally, in this life, joined to it: hereafter Christ himself will dissolve the outward connection, Matt 25:32. Add to this that in invisible churches we can do more than approximate to the proper position which each member of Christ holds in his body. Many are first in a visible church who are last in the true church, and vice versa. And Scripture ... recognizes the distinction; speaking of churches, but also of THE Church, which is the body of Christ. 5

Wherever the gospel is preached in word and ceremony—that is, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper—there the church is. Wherever church discipline of the New Testament kind is maintained, there the church is. NOT the church in its invisible reality, but local and temporal representations of it.

Sign of True Church

What is the sign of the true church? What is its hallmark?

The first time a topic is mentioned in Scripture is usually significant. As well as being predictive, the first mention also reveals a permanent truth or principle. So it is with the church.

In Matthew 16 it is clear that confession of Jesus as the Christ—the Son of the Living God—is the **distinctive** mark of all members of Christ’s church.

Interestingly, in the second half of Matthew 16 we have these themes: 1. The Christ, 2. The Church, 3. The Cross, 4. The Coming. These are the basic doctrines of the true church.

Augustine, the bishop of ancient Hippo, said, “There is no salvation outside the church.” He is right, **provided** we understand the church—the true church—is much bigger and grander than we thought. It includes the entire family of God on earth. It includes that entire family from Eden until the End. It includes many who have not heard the name of Christ, yet have responded to his Spirit.

Where Is Your Church Membership?

Are you a member of the true church?

Have you built your faith, not upon a human creed, but upon the God-human, the church’s one Foundation? Have you received the anointing of the Holy Spirit? He is yours immediately upon your committal to Christ. Do you bear the mark of the genuine disciple? “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

Is your regular practice such that in the Last Great Day, Christ will say “Yes!” to you?

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world I tell you the truth, what-

ever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:34, 40)

Come indeed! For blessed are you! In Christ, you are a member of that true church against which the gates of hell shall never prevail.

Footnotes

1. A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, page 887. Strong supports his position with Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22-23; 3:10; 5:24-33; Colossians 1:18; Hebrews 12:23.
2. *Ibid.*, page 888.
3. See Matthew 18:17; Acts 14:23; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:14.
4. Patrick Fairbairn, *Imperial Bible Dictionary* 2, page 33.
5. *Ibid.*, page 38.

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