**(Why You Can’t Have) Jesus Without the Church**

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Contemporary Christianity is fond of pushing Jesus without the Church. Like its secular counterpart (in which people claim to be “spiritual, but not religious”), it’s an attempt to have the relationship without the rules. If I’m lonely or going through a tragedy, I can pray, but I don’t have to worry about fasting when I don’t want to, or being associated with a bunch of fellow believers that I look down upon.

But Jesus-without-the-Church is a **rejection** of Jesus.

**I. Jesus and the Church**

To see this, you need to look no further than His own words. His opening words in the Gospel of Mark are “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). That is, we’re not invited to a merely personal relationship with Jesus. We’re invited to be part of His Kingdom. Trying to have the King without His Kingdom is trying to put God on our own terms, and He ***never*** plays ball with that.

In Matthew 16, after the Apostle Simon Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus replies with a “confession” of His own (Mt. 16:17-19):

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock **I will build my church,** and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Whether you think that the “rock” in this passage is Simon (who just had his named changed, by Jesus, to Peter, which means “Rock”) or not, you can’t escape the fact that Jesus said that He would build His own Church.

St. Paul goes even further, saying that God “has put all things under his [Jesus Christ’s] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:22-23). So the fullness of Christ is Jesus and the Church. That’s literally what the Bible says. A few chapters later, Paul explains that Jesus is the Head and the Church is His Body, and compares it to the one-flesh union of husband and wife (Eph. 5:23, 31-32).

And why should we trust Paul on this? Apart from the obvious fact that it’s in inspired Scripture, Paul knows these things are true from experience. Before his conversion, on his way to continue his persecution of the visible Church (Acts 8:3), he is stopped by Jesus, who identifies Himself as the Church (Acts 9:1-7):

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, **why do you persecute me?**” 5 And he said, “**Who are you, Lord?**” And he said, “**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting;** but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.

Jesus, already in Heaven, speaks of Himself as being actively persecuted by Saul/Paul in his persecution of the Church. That is to say, the Bible presents the Church as a continuation of the Incarnation of Christ on Earth. If you understand this, you’ll understand why a Christian that says that the Church is unnecessary, or says that the earthly Church is apostate, etc., is presenting a false version of Christianity.

All of this is to say that to accept what Jesus is offering means accepting His Church. He comes with a Kingdom. To accept Jesus is to accept His Church. So the question isn’t “should we have Jesus and the Church, or just Jesus?” There’s no way to have Jesus apart from His Church. He doesn’t offer us that.

**II. Which Church?**

So the question, instead, ought to be “which Church did Jesus found in Matthew 16?” Or to put it a different way, “what sort of Church did Jesus found in Matthew 16?”

The Bible makes two features immediately clear: it’s a **visible** Church, and it’s a **structured** Church. Perhaps the clearest evidence of the visibility of the Church is Matthew 5:14-16,

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

An invisible Church could never fulfill this mandate. And just as the Church is visible, so it is structured. Christ appointed the Twelve and sent them out to preach (Mark 3:14). These Apostles ordained seven men (selected by the people) as deacons (Acts 6:1-6). Paul, who was also personally sent by Christ (as we saw above), appointed presbyters in the cities (Acts 14:23), etc.

In other words, we **never** see anyone simply declare themselves pastors of the flock of Christ, nor do we even see the people ordaining their own clergy. Even the deacons, who the do pick in Acts 6, must have hands laid upon them by the Apostles before they are sent forth (Acts 6:6), and this isn’t automatic. Indeed, St. Paul warns “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Timothy 5:22). So while we might imagine the early Church as entirely grassroots, the Biblical depiction has a good deal of evidence pointing towards top-down leadership of the visible Church.

All of this is to say that Christ founded the Apostolic Church, that is, the Church run by the Apostles. And this Church, in addition to being Apostolic, was One Church. This is how Acts 4:32-35 describes the earliest days of the Church:

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.

Much of what is written on this passages focuses on the fact that we’re not required to give everything to the Church. That’s true, but it’s still remarkable that the Church being described is (a) visible; and (b) organized, with the Apostles acting as Church leadership. Note also that the Church of this age is described as being “of one heart and soul.” It’s not just their possessions that they’re sharing, but a common faith.

Even when Peter and Paul feuded, they didn’t turn around and start their own churches. When that sort of factionalism does begin in the Church of Corinth, St. Paul rebukes them for it (1 Cor. 1:12-13):

I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.** For it has been reported to me by Chlo′e’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apol′los,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

 So you can’t have one group breaking off to follow Apollos, or Paul…. or Luther, or Calvin, etc.

Of course, the exact reason that St. Paul has to warn the Corinthians is that it can be frustrating to be part of the visible Church at times. Church leaders say and do things we dislike: sometimes, these things are foolish; sometimes, even sinful. And yet, we’re not told to have no dissensions unless we disagree. We’re told to have no dissensions.

**III. What the Church Isn’t**

 The famous sixteenth-century Protestant Reformer John Calvin, in Book IV of [The Institutes of Christian Religion](http://www.reformed.org/books/institutes/books/book4/bk4ch01.html#four.htm), would say:

But as it is now our purpose to discourse of **the visible Church,** let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels, (Matth. 22: 30.) For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, **beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for,** as Isaiah and Joel testify, (Isa. 37: 32; Joel 2: 32.)

Now, these are strange words from Calvin, as he had gone into schism from the visible Church. Taken at face value, he would seem to be declaring his own damnation. But Calvin goes on to redefine what it means to be “the visible Church,” rejecting a millennium and half of the Church’s self-understanding:

Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence, since his promise cannot fail, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them,” (Matth. 18: 20.)

Note that Calvin’s redefinition eliminates any need for the Church to be Apostolic (unless you need priests for the valid administration of the Sacraments, which he denied). You could accept Christ, reject the Gospel, and still be part of the visible Church, so long as you preserved the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Likewise, the Corinthians who threatened to split into countless different sects would have been fine, since the Church of God still would have had “some existence” by virtue of their continued belief in Christ.

Another way that Church was redefined in the Reformation is reducing it to just the collection of the saved. If you’re saved, you’re part of the Kingdom. If you’re not saved, you’re not part of the Kingdom. But Christ doesn’t say that. He says quite otherwise, in fact (Matthew 13:47-50):

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.

In Heaven, the Church will only contain the saved. On earth, that’s not the case. Here, the Church contains both good fish and bad fish. Or to use another of Christ’s images, it contains both wheat and weeds. And in response to the question, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” He says, “No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.” (Matthew 13:28-30).

So the very attempt to reinvent the Church as just the saved is exactly what He told us not to do.

**IV. What This Means**

This Biblical depiction of the Church poses serious problems for the Reformation.

Think about it this way. Christ founded a structured, visible Church. **Could a Christian in the first century choose to accept Christ but not join this Church?** No. We saw in Part I that you can’t accept Christ and not the Church, and we saw in Part II that when the Corinthians started to factionalize, Paul reeled them back in.

What about a Christian of the second century? Could he choose to reject the Church, now that it’s in the hands of the successors of the Apostles? No: the call for all Christians to be all part of the One Church wasn’t just for the Apostolic age. That’s actually quite clear in John 17:20-23, in which Jesus explicitly prayed for His future followers:

I do not pray for these only, but also **for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one;** even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.

Amazingly, no Protestant denomination claims to be this one structured, visible Church. The Methodists and the Presbyterians, for all that they may disagree with one another, never claim “everyone should be Methodist, because Jesus Christ founded the Methodist Church, and it’s the one true Church.” They don’t even pretend that’s the case. When we Catholics do make this claim about our Church, we’re viewed as arrogant. But if we’re the true Church, this is exactly the kind of claim we should be making. And if we’re not the true Church, we shouldn’t exist.