

Doctrine of the Church: Attributes, II

We are studying the attributes of the church on page 42 of Edmund Clowney's book, *The Church*. We have examined the unity and sanctity of the church and now we are thinking about the catholicity or universality of the church.

As part of the Great Commission, the Lord commands the disciples to do the work of disciple-making of all nations. He made no distinctions there between different peoples, and thus it was a catholic or a universal enterprise. Furthermore, in Galatians 3 we learn more about this statement: "You are all Sons of God." Galatians 3:26 says, "Through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise." All believers are sons or daughters of God by faith in Christ, regardless of race, social status, or sex. Because they have been united to Christ, they have been joined to each other. This text speaks of the unity of the church in verse 28, "You are one in Christ, Jesus," and also the universality. Regardless of those different distinctions, they are not totally done away with. We do not all become unisex, for example, but we are one in the Lord and the Lord receives us regardless of those distinctions.

In Revelation 5:9 and 10, we saw a picture of the heavenly worship of the redeemed. There we learned that Christ is worthy to take a scroll and open its seals and to reveal the judgments of God. In Revelation 5:9, the lamb is addressed: "you were slain and with your blood you purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priest to serve our God and they will reign on the earth." The church is catholic, not in the sense that it is catholic with a capital C, as in Roman Catholic. Rather, as my colleague David Jones says, "The catholicity of the Church follows from the ethnic universalism of the Gospel." The Gospel goes out to all peoples regardless of language, color, nationality, or any other distinction, and in that the Gospel goes and conquers, the church is universal. Some practical ramifications are easy to draw. We ought to have a broad view of the Christian church, a view that exceeds our own local church or denomination. We really are pretty myopic if we think our little church or our little denomination, maybe even our big denomination, is all there is to the body of Christ. No, the Church is bigger than that, and we are just a part when you take that bigger, more universal look. We also need to be involved in some local congregation, and many of us choose to be affiliated with a particular denomination because of what it stands for. That is fine, but that is not all there is. The Church is bigger than the Southern Baptist Convention, the National Baptist Church, the PCA, and many other groups we could name.

Wycliffe Bible Translators have done great in this way because Christians from various backgrounds have worked to translate the Scriptures into the mother tongues of people who did not have the Scriptures. It is an incredible thing. I just read a Wycliffe report where the translator was rejoicing and the Word of God was already doing its work. A man had received for the first time in his hands a copy of the Word of God in his own language; perhaps it was just one of the Gospels. The report said, "He sat there for hours with tears streaming down his face." Can you imagine hearing God's Word for the first time? It was just beautiful. It was as if God's message was now directed toward him. That is the truth. It was a wonderful thing to read about.

A further implication of this passage is that racial discrimination is sinful. Social discrimination is sinful—and likewise sexual discrimination. There are people who hate other people based upon their

racial, social, or sexual classes, and that is not godly; it is ungodly. We need to take positive measures on all those accounts as the Lord gives us opportunity.

The Church is one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. What do we mean by apostolicity? You say, “This makes me nervous in light of the Roman claims that apostolicity is based upon unbroken succession from Peter.” Is that what we mean? Of course not. Look back to John 17:20, a verse we already read: “My prayer is not for them alone,—the 11 alone—I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” Jesus prays for those who will believe in him through the Apostles’ teaching. That is what it means to be apostolic. It means to be faithful to the Apostles’ teaching.

You know Acts 2:42. The early Christians devoted themselves to four things: the Apostles’ teaching (listed first), fellowship, the breaking of bread (probably a reference to the Lord’s Supper), and prayer.

The first thing mentioned is the Apostles’ teaching. The early Christians devoted themselves to that and so should we. Paul confuses his readers sometimes. Let us compare the difference between Philippians 1 and Galatians 1. In Philippians 1 Paul was imprisoned, probably in Rome. (I take a traditional view of that rather than the idea that it was the cesarian imprisonment.) In any case, he was imprisoned, and he rejoiced that people were preaching the Gospel, although they were preaching it from various motives. Some were preaching it from good motives because they were emboldened in their witness because their hero of the faith was imprisoned for Jesus. Others were preaching the true Gospel from bad motives, perhaps something like this: “I thought so. Paul thought he was a hotshot.” They were trying to get ahead of him. They may have been thinking, “God laid him on the shelf. He was not as important as he thought he was.” They were preaching the true Gospel out of wrong motives. You think that hurt the apostle Paul? Of course it did; he is a human being too. But ultimately what was his attitude toward that? His answer in Philippians 1 is that he rejoiced because “the true gospel was preached.”

In Galatians 1, however, he envisions a different situation. Here he does not rejoice, rather he gets mad. He gets fighting, cussing mad, as a matter of fact, and he declares anathema on human beings or even angles who would preach a different Gospel. Verse 8 says, “even if we [the Apostles] or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preach to you, let him be eternally condemned.” That means let him be damned. This is strong, strong language. In case we missed it, he says it again in verse 9. Philippians 1 and Galatians 1 are two different attitudes. Fidelity to the Gospel (faithfulness to the Gospel) is the test of apostleship. So in chapter 2 Paul could say he went up to Jerusalem, to those who were Apostles before him, and James, John, and Peter gave him the right hand of fellowship and added nothing to his Gospel message. It is faithfulness to the Gospel that is the test of apostleship. Even if an apostle, angel, or anybody else should preach any other message than the true Gospel, Paul has strong words of woe for those people.

Protestantism, therefore, has insisted that faithfulness to the Apostles’ message as recorded in Scripture is the index of apostolicty. Contrast this with the official Roman Catholic view from Ludwig Ott in *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*.

Christ founded his church on the Apostles by transferring to them his threefold office: teaching, pastoral, and sacerdotal [that is priestly], and by appointing Peter the supreme pastor and teacher of the church. Christ willed that these offices and the powers corresponding to them should be transmitted by successors since the purpose of the church makes it necessary that these be perpetuated. In the unbroken succession of the bishops from the Apostles, the apostolic character of the church most clearly appears. It is sufficient to point to the apostolic succession of the

Roman Church because the Roman bishop is the head of the whole church and vehicle of the infallible doctrinal power. Consequently, the apostolic church and the unfalsified apostolic teaching are where Peter, or his successor, is.

To the contrary, organizational succession is no guarantee of doctrinal faithfulness. The reformation occurred for good reason: the Gospel had been hidden. Instead, the unfalsified apostolic teaching is found where faithful pastors accurately expound the Apostles' doctrine from holy Scripture.

Is Paul just using a hyperbole? Is he using exaggerated language here when he talks about people being eternally condemned? I do not think so. He is saying that is what he thinks should happen to people who distort the Gospel. If you are envisioning the situation of true believers preaching a false Gospel, I would say he is not envisioning that. He is not even considering that possibility. The notion of the Apostles preaching a false Gospel is an exaggeration, however, and certainly any good angel would not do it either. But cultists do preach a false Gospel, and Paul had strong words for anybody who did in his own time. So Paul does exaggerate some, but not in his desire that they be condemned. He is mad because if somebody tinkers with the Gospel, that leads people to hell. Think of Jesus' words that if somebody leads even one of these little one who believes in me astray, it would be better for him to have a millstone (it was not the little grinding stone that was operated by hand. It was called a donkey stone because the animal power had to turn it, it was so big) and let him be thrown into the sea, maybe the sea of Galilee—the notion is instant death. So, the Bible uses strong language for those who lead others astray.

There is some exaggeration involved—at least an almost impossible situation envisioned a true Apostle preaching a false Gospel. But Paul means even apostleship derives its authority from the Word of God and not just a Roman notion that no matter what people teach, it is succession from Peter that ensures the true church. No, it does not, Paul says. The Apostles are only Apostles because they preach the genuine article, the true Gospel.

I was referring to Philippians 1:12-18 when I said Paul rejoices in people preaching the true Gospel even for the wrong reasons. This is a very poignant passage because it is for reasons that are hurtful to him personally. Verse 18 says, "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this, I rejoice." He makes subservient his whole ministry and life to the Gospel. That is a wonderful thing. I might say, by contrast, sometimes we are too thin skinned.

At the bottom of page 43 the book talks about practical ramifications of this biblical view of apostolicity. Due to the subjectivity inherent in Protestantism that we spoke of earlier, they broke with a monolith. Rome was unified. They claimed to be ancient, unvarying, universal, and apostolic. As soon as Luther, Calvin, and others broke from that, there was a problem. They were fragmented. They disagreed among themselves. Due to the subjectivity inherent in Protestantism, churches and Christians have seen a need for doctrinal statements for creeds, confessions, and catechisms, which are instruments to teach our children. This is an expression of apostolicity. If we say, "Here is a statement of faith; these are things we believe," we do not pick little minor points. We pick things that we think are very important and significant. Our claim is that those are the teachings of the Apostles of the Word of God. Our being a true church is because of this apostolicity, this mark. There is an overlap between the attributes and marks, the mark of the pure preaching of the Word and the attribute of apostolicity. The importance within Protestantism for the training of ministers comes from this.

Let us talk for a minute about the importance of biblical preaching. When a church looks for a pastor, what are they looking for? Many things today (maybe too many things), but the bottom line ought to be his ability to preach the Word of God. The importance of Sunday school teaching is grounded in this notion of fidelity to the Apostles' teaching. The success of things like Bible Study Fellowship (it is not perfect in every regard) is because it has promoted much study of the Word of God.

We are moving on to page 44 and a new topic. It is a bit of an excursus, a little bit of an aside concerning the church and its attributes. Church separation; is it ever right to separate from a Christian church? Is it ever demanded biblically? Yes.

I will talk a little bit about the definition of apostolicity. I found some helpfulness in Clowney's book on the church. He distinguished between two senses of "apostle" in the New Testament. An Apostle was an eyewitness of the risen Christ who was commissioned by Him in a special way to proclaim His Gospel to the nations. There is a lesser sense of "apostle" as well. Coming out of the writings of the Apostles in the context of those in revelatory ministries, they are speaking forth the Word of God in their preaching. Then in fulfillment of John 14, 15, and 16, the Father and the Son sent the Spirit and they wrote the New Testament. Coming out of that is the notion within the early church of the church being apostolic. The contention of the reformers, and I would agree, was that it did not have reference to geography or to Rome. The Roman Catholic claims grew as history moved along and the extravagant claims made in the high Middle Ages were not made early on. The reformers were right on when they said being apostolic does not mean being officially connected with the Roman Church, but rather it means perpetuating the teaching of the Apostles. We know about that teaching, not from word of mouth passed down, but the Apostles committed these things to writing.

Some may ask, "If all that is meant is being faithful to the Scriptures, then why did the Constantinopolitan Creed not say, 'One holy, catholic, and scriptural church' instead of apostolic?"

I would be careful not to insist that it had to be churches personally founded by the Apostles because, again, they died and it was rather passing on the Gospel entrusted to them that would make a church apostolic. I think it is virtually the same as saying a scriptural church, but it is emphasizing the preaching of the Apostles and the message about Jesus Christ and Him crucified. It is something closer to saying a Gospel church, but they do not have to use our words to do it.

It has been commented that we also ought to remember that the Roman Church added the Apocrypha, which deals with Old Testament books. I do not believe that the counsels were referring to that when they spoke of the church as apostolic.

On the issue of church separation, is it ever right to separate from a fellowship of professed believers? Is it ever demanded? These are tricky questions and I am not going to answer them perfectly for anybody's particular situation, perhaps, but we can make some progress by thinking about these things. Third, we will look at biblical principles on page 45. Second, we will look at theological perspective on degrees of errors. This is a very helpful chart that David Jones uses. I found it very helpful in giving me perspective. But first of all, what are we talking about in terms of the words? Let us define our terms.

We can distinguish apostasy, heresy, and schism. On Apostasy, in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, we read, "Apostasy is the abandonment or renunciation of Christianity, either voluntarily or by compulsion." Thus the person who commits this is an apostate. The verb is apostatize, not apostasize. Apostasy is thus renouncing the Christian faith, denying the faith that one once

professed. It could be at the sword, for example, in terms of some Muslim evangelism. We are not going to get into all the ramifications and biblical teachings on apostasy now. For now, apostasy is a departure from the Christian faith by someone who once professed it. Notice that a pagan is not an apostate. He cannot be. You have got to claim to be in, in order to come out.

On the subject of heresy, in Erickson's *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* that I mentioned earlier, he says, "Heresy is a belief or teaching that contradicts Scripture and Christian theology." It is a good definition, but I want to add to it a bit. It is not strong enough. Every belief that contradicts Scripture would not qualify as heresy in my book. I would define heresy as a *major* belief or teaching that contradicts Scripture, a subversive belief. That is an important one. Obviously if believers have differences, for example, on future things, then ultimately at some point some of them contradict Scripture and some do not. I would not call that heresy. That brings me to point number two, and we will get to that in a moment. So, apostasy is walking away from the Christian faith and repudiating it. Heresy is major doctrinal deviation.

Schism is formal and willful separation from the unity of the church. It is a sin to stop going to church, to have nothing to do with the Christian church, to separate oneself from it.

With those definitions in hand, to some degree, however comfortable you are with them, what about a theological perspective on degrees of error? Are all errors of the same magnitude and seriousness? By no means! "Churches are more or less apostolic in terms of the fourth attribute of the church just discussed [that is, doctrinally pure or orthodox] according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced in them."—I am quoting David Jones, my colleague here in systematic theology at Covenant Seminary.—"Even the purest churches are subject to error, yet some are more faithful than others in confessing the system of doctrine thought in the holy Scriptures. Systemic heresies are hardly distinguishable from apostasy."

Now, I cannot do this without naming names and using examples. If I happen to pull on a cherished belief of yours, all I can say is forgive me. I am not trying to be nasty, but I cannot do this in the abstract. Do you understand? I have to talk about some examples. So I do it with no malice in my heart.

Apostasy is on the right hand side of the chart. It means rejecting Jesus after professing faith in Him. It means doing what Judas did. That is apostasy. He is an apostate. Biblical teaching is on the left side. It is in the middle that we get ourselves into troubled waters. Biblical teaching is the deity of Christ. Biblical teaching is inerrancy. Biblical teaching is to say that human beings are made up of two parts: a body and an immaterial part called the soul or spirit. In my estimation, that is biblical teaching as well. We distinguish wrong opinions from systemic errors. How? Systemic errors are errors that influence other beliefs. There is a notion of system here. Think of the veins of a leaf or the circulatory system of the human body. If you put something into the bloodstream it is going to go other places and cause problems. What is wrong opinion? Half of us in this room have some wrong opinions concerning Christian baptism. I am not trying to be a proud Presbyterian here. I might be the one with the wrong opinions; you might too. Let us say we have Baptists and Presbyterians here. Along the lines of Ephesians 4, I would encourage us all to hold to the one baptism of the Scriptures, but I am not labeling that with particular mode or even a particular subject. I said carefully I would put this under biblical teaching. Christian baptism is baptism done by a minister of the Gospel with water (I am deliberately leaving mode open) in the name of the Trinity. Let us say that immersion is right. Sprinkling and pouring would then be wrong. My own conclusion is that all three are right. Let us take that view from the Baptist view that says that immersion alone is right. Maybe some would not be so strong and say, "I

cannot say all three are wrong, but I think this is the best way.” Somebody is wrong somewhere in those things. I would be happy to put that in the category of wrong opinion. That is not apostasy; that is not great heresy. There is a difference of opinion there, and contrary views cannot both be right. But that is not so serious. Likewise, I would put some concerns about future things (the nature of the Millennium) under the category of wrong opinion. Is it a literal 1,000 year earthly kingdom? Is it a spiritual kingdom? Under clear biblical teaching, I would conclude this: Christ reigns now, and Christ will reign on the new earth. That is earthly; that is literal and historical. I am not as comfortable making a decision here. You will see when I teach future things I will present four views of the Millennium. I will cautiously knock out a couple of them and suggest that I cannot really make a firm decision between two others of them. I have a wrong opinion there. Myself, I have a wrong opinion! You say, “Actually, that is not a bad way to do it,” because if you are not really sure, it is better to hold something unclear in abeyance than dogmatizing on it. The point is systemic error is more important than a wrong opinion because other things are seriously affected.

Errancy is not just a wrong opinion. Errancy is the opposite of inerrancy. Inerrancy I put under biblical teaching. It is having confidence that God’s Word speaks truth through all matters that it speaks. Errancy is a systemic error. If you hold that the Bible has errors, at least hypothetically, that could manifest itself in almost any doctrine. I know some people who formally hold to errancy, but who almost practice inerrancy, but it is still a dangerous game. At every point I put my human reason in judgment on the Bible and say it is wrong and I am right. I am on shaky ground if I do this. I am not trying to be unkind, but as a Calvinist I would regard Arminianism as a systemic error. I am not trying to be nasty, but I have to give you examples of what I think.

To hold that our will is free, as Arminian theologians say, has repercussions for many, many doctrines. These include election, which is viewed as forcing faith, and faith, which in a consistent Arminian system can be forfeited once it is exercised. This to me has great mixed problems in the assurance of salvation, for example. Again, I say it without any hatred in my heart. I am remembering my last lecture that said I am one in Christ with my Arminian brothers and sisters. Yet they would regard my Calvinism as a systemic error, and I would respect them for that. But since this is my class, I am regarding their Arminianism as a systemic error. But notice I am not calling it a heresy. Why? It is not heresy because it does not touch faith in the person and work of Christ. I am saying that it is more than a wrong opinion, but I am not calling it a heresy, and I am not calling Arminians heretics. I have reformed friends that do that, and I think they are wrong. I think their attitudes are basically wrong. They have made the mistake of not making these distinctions. They think there are two types of people in the world. The good guys all look like us and believe like us, and the other guys are foul and messed up in every way. No, it is not that simple. It is a range, and we all have truth mixed in with error. May our errors only be wrong opinions. To God, our errors are only wrong opinions.

An example of systemic heresy is justification by works. That steps over the line. If the cult says, “Here is how you are saved: you believe, repent, are baptized, do certain things and do not do certain other things,” that is more than problematic. That is more harmful than a wrong opinion. That is more harmful—that errancy reaching out into the different areas and corrupting different doctrines. This is hardly distinguishable from renunciation of the Christian faith. Do you understand the Dr. Jones statement now? Systemic heresies are hardly distinguishable from apostasy. Cultists who are brought up in churches that taught “the truth” and believe what the cult teaches are to all intents and purposes apostates. This distinction between wrong opinion and systemic heresy gives me a way of thinking and looking at things.

I will give you one more example that I was reminded of again while teaching the doctrine of man. I mentioned before that I would regard the fact that human beings are made of two parts, body and soul, as biblical teaching. Modern theologians in general say we are made up of one part. Would I put that in wrong opinion or systemic error? I would consider that a systemic error because in denying that we can have a soul separate from the body, they deny the intermediate state. They say when you die that is the end of you, and your soul sleeps. The Bible teaches instead that “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5). Think of Jesus’ statement in Luke 23 to the thief who believed in Him: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” In Philippians 1, Paul said he desired to depart the body and be with Christ, which is far better than even knowing the Lord on earth.

So, monism, as it is called, is a systemic error. It has other repercussions. It does not damn a person. It is not a heresy, but it is a significant error in the view of who we are. Some of you think we are three parts, known as trichotomy. According to this view, we should distinguish the immaterial into soul and spirit and assign them certain functions. Where would I put that? It depends on what you do with it. I regard the biblical teaching as dichotomy or dualism, that we have two parts. But if you adhere to trichotomy, yet do not do anything with it—if you do not build a doctrine of the Christian life on the distinction between soul and spirit—it is a wrong opinion that may be harmless. You could say soul is different from spirit because soul means this and spirit means that. And certain passages leave you with that conclusion. You are in the wrong opinion category if you use that distinction in your understanding of Christian growth and nurture the way the Bible uses it (it does not use the distinction because I do not even think the Bible really even makes it). You can stay biblical and use it the way the Bible does and build no doctrine of the Christian life upon it. On the other hand, if you do build a doctrine of the Christian life upon trichotomy, as some good people have done (Charles Solomon, Watchman Nee, and Bill Gothert), faulty views of the Christian life result. I would put that under systemic error, not heresy. They are not teaching a different Gospel.

That is an example where departure from the biblical teaching that we are two parts and subdividing us into three parts can merely be a wrong opinion if you do not build a doctrine of the Christian life from that basis. But it can get you into systemic error and mislead people if you do build something upon it. I am just giving you examples to help you think about these things so in the future you can think about other problems that arise and where to put them on the chart.

It has been asked how the Reformation regards the Roman Catholic Church. You need to consider particular doctrines. They certainly regarded the Roman Catholics’ view of salvation as a systemic heresy. It involved a view of merit that was, in the eyes of both Luther and Calvin, an attack upon the merits of Christ on the cross. On the other hand, we have to be careful not to over-generalize. They regarded individual Catholics and even churches within Rome as still being true churches, not only possibly but actually, if they believe the true Gospel in spite of the church.

For example, you can have a pastor who went to a school where he was not taught properly and does not believe the Bible. However, he can still preach the Gospel because his mother or some other source taught it to him. He could have systemic error because his bad study and bad views of the Scriptures affect different things. But if he understands the Gospel, then still you could be saved. On the other hand, if the Gospel is undermined, for example by teaching justification by works, that is not the true Gospel. That is a damning error.

Another example is a denial of the deity of Christ. Biblical teaching is that Jesus is God and man and one person. A wrong opinion would be trying to sort out certain mysteries regarding the person of Christ

where we really cannot know for sure. Systemic heresy is the denial of the deity of Christ. It cuts you off from grace. It does not change Christ, but it involves a wrong view of Christ, a defective view of Christ. As a result I cannot trust Him to save me if I think of Him as merely a man or an angel.

Universalism, the teaching that everybody will be saved in the end, is an example of false teaching. It is at least systemic error. It is not going to benefit Gospel preaching. But people are not always consistent. I know a friend who sat in on a missions class in a liberal seminary. The professor had taught all the way along the course that everybody is saved. My student friend was shocked when he heard the professor one day give his testimony of faith in Christ. The student said, "Sir, would you explain how that fits with your view that everybody is saved?" The professor said, "Sure. I believe that, for me, I have to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." And the student said, "I think he really believes in Christ as Lord and Savior." The professor would be apparently a believer in Christ, but his view is a serious error. It is heresy, or borderline. If people are all saved anyway, then why do I need to preach the Gospel? This view denies that Christ is the Savior of the world and allows for other saviors. That is going to send people to hell.

It gets complicated. I guess I would say certain universalisms would be examples of systemic error (that is being charitable). Others would be examples of systemic heresies. Think of the Unitarian Universalist Church in our nation and its loss of the Gospel. Interestingly that went side by side with their denial of the deity of Christ. With the denial of His deity went a lack of interest in His atonement. I do not know what came first. They believe, at the same time, that Jesus is God and everybody is saved. It goes together and they are both wrong. That is systemic heresy.

The inexactness of Bible translation would rarely get us into the area of wrong opinions. For example, I think nobody really knows what "baptism for the dead" means in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul knew and the Corinthians knew, but we do not know what it means. The Mormons think they know what it means. They are in systemic heresy because they baptize for the dead. They baptize by proxy to try to save us.