



In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.

THE CHURCH

As we go around the city or town we live in, we find an abundance of diverse churches that are either allied to known Christian denominations or not, commonly called non-denominational churches. There are even some groups that say they believe in the Bible, yet do not believe in any establishment called “church” saying that the Bible is the one and only true source for knowing Christ and being saved.

Given this wide diversity and that the Holy Bible clearly speaks about “the Church”, people have become more interested in understanding what is meant by the word “church” in the Holy Bible and what makes a real Church. The study of ecclesiology (coming from the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*) is the study of the theological understanding of the Christian Church as a historical living reality.

As we will see in this article, this understanding is important in terms of God’s relationship with His people, salvation, and how salvation is delivered to us through the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

I. THE WORD “CHURCH” IN THE HOLY BIBLE

Just as many words in the Holy Bible, the word “church” has a few different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Each of these meanings is not a separate entity, but each one is related to the other and gives the complete meaning of how one should understand the Church and live his or her life in the Church.

1) **The Church as a Place of Worship:**

One of the meanings of the church in the Holy Bible is that of the place where the believers gather for worship. St. Paul makes this clear as shown in the following verses:

+ “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*).

+ “But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in **church**, and let him speak to himself and to God” (*1Cor. 14:28*).

+ “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. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in **church**” (*1Cor. 14:34-35*).

+ “but if I am delayed, 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*).

It is clear in these verses that not only is the church a place of worship, but that there are orders, rites, and a proper system whereby the believers should conduct themselves in the church, especially during the time of worship. The church is a holy place that should be revered because it is the house of God. This was the feeling of Jacob when he had his dream of the ladder reaching between earth and heaven and the angels of God were ascending and descending on the ladder. He was afraid and said,

“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven! Then Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel [that is *House of God*]” (*Gen. 28:17-19*). The church, the house of God is a holy place that should be given all respect and reverence.

The tabernacle and the temple of the Old Testament were to be honored and considered holy, a place where God’s presence was manifest and revealed that He was with His people. If this was the feeling of the people of Israel in the Old Testament concerning the tabernacle or the temple, how much more the church of the New Testament in which we receive salvation, remission of sins, and eternal life through the partaking of the True Body and True Blood of Christ?

2) The Church as a Family and their Home:

The worship of God is not limited to the church building. Of course, there are certain services that can normally only be performed in the church, particularly certain sacraments like baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, holy matrimony and the consecration of bishops and ordaining of priests and deacons. However, the worship of God and the spiritual sacrifices offered are supposed to continue with every individual in their families and homes. There is to be a spiritual altar in each home where the family offers up sacrifices of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, merciful deeds, faith, etc... The home is the extension of the church so that each home in itself should be a church, a house of God. **“But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”** (*Joshua 24:15*).

St. Paul mentions this a few times in his epistles:

+ When speaking about Priscilla and Aquila, he says, “Likewise 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*).

+ “Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the **church that is in his house**” (*Col. 4:15*).

+ “To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer..., and to the **church in your house**” (*Philemon 1-2*).

3) The Church as the Priest(s):

“Moreover 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. **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**” (*Matt. 18:15-18*).

It is clear from these verses that our Lord Jesus Christ is not speaking about the church as a place of worship, the home, or even the community of believers. He is speaking about those specific individuals that He has given the authority to bind and to loose (*Matt. 18:18*), to forgive and to retain sins (*John 20:21-23*), i.e. the priests. Here, in these cited verses, the authority is given to the disciples. However, the same authority is given to all who have received that breath of the Holy Spirit that Christ gave to the Apostles and they passed through the apostolic succession until this very day. In

addition, since the forgiveness of sins occurs through the sacraments of the Church, it is only the priest that has the right to officiate and perform those services.

St. Cyprian of Carthage in the 3rd century clarifies this very point:

“But it is manifest where and by whom remission of sins can be given; to wit, that which is given in baptism. For first of all the Lord gave that power to Peter... And after the resurrection, also, He speaks to the apostles, saying, ‘As the Father hath sent me, even so I send you’. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained’. **Whence we perceive that only they who are set over the Church and established in the Gospel law, and in the ordinance of the Lord, are allowed to baptize and to give remission of sins;** but that without, nothing can either be bound or loosed, where there is none who can either bind or loose anything” (*Epistle LXXII:7, ANF, vol. 5, p. 381*).

He further clarifies that those in the priesthood who are successors of the Apostles by the same principle, the authority and breath of the Holy Spirit given by our Lord Jesus Christ through the Apostles, are the only valid priests in the Church:

“But what is the greatness of his error, and what the depth of his blindness, who says that remission of sins can be granted in the synagogues of heretics, and does not abide on the foundation of the one Church which was once based by Christ upon the rock, may be perceived from this, that Christ said to Peter alone, ‘Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven’. And again, in the Gospel, when Christ breathed on the apostles alone, saying, ‘Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain they are retained’. Therefore the power of remitting sins was given to the apostles and to the churches which they, sent by Christ, established, and to the bishops who succeeded to them by vicarious ordination. But the enemies of the one Catholic Church in which we are, and the adversaries – of us who have succeeded the apostles – asserting for themselves, in opposition to us, unlawful priesthoods, and setting up profane altars, what else are they than Korah, Dathan, Abiram, profane with a like wickedness, and about to suffer the same punishments which they did, as well as those who agree with them, just as their partners and abettors perished with a like death to theirs?” (*Epistle LXXIV:17, ibid., p. 394*).

Therefore, there cannot be a legitimate Church without a legitimate priesthood, i.e. those who have received that breath of the Holy Spirit passed down from our Lord Jesus Christ through the Apostles to their successors until today.

4) The Church as the Congregation or the Community of Believers:

This meaning of the word “church”, i.e. the community of believers or the congregation, in the Holy Bible is probably the most common. It relates to either the **local group of believers in one city or region** (*Acts 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3, 4, 41; 16:5; 18:22; 20:17; Rom. 16:1; etc...*); **a group of believers from a particular ethnicity or background** (*Rom. 16:4*); **all the believers at a certain time period irrespective of place** (*Acts 2:47; 5:11; 15:22; 20:28; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 10:32; 12:28; 14:4; 15:9; Gal 1:13; etc...*); **or all the believers over all time** (*Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-32; Col. 1:18, 24; Heb. 12:23*).

II. WHAT DEFINES THE CHURCH?

1) The Notes of the Church:

In the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, we say that we believe in “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church”. These four characteristics, or notes, of the Church, give us our faith as to the essence of the Church.

a) One:

At the time of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of the 4th century, there was One Church with one faith throughout the world. And in spite of the many different Christian denominations that exist today, we still say that there is “One” Church. The reason for this is that Christ is One and the Church is “one body in Christ” (*Rom. 12:5*). “The essential elements in Church Unity may be stated in agreement with the teaching of St. Paul (*Eph. 4:4-6; 1Cor. 10:17; 12:12-27*) as being the common worship of the one God, the common holding of the one faith, the common possession of the one sacramental life, the common aim at the attainment of the one hope, and the common indwelling by the one Spirit” (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings, 1912, vol. III, p. 625; quoted in *Vienna Dialogue*, p. 44).

b) Holy:

The Holiness of the Church is considered an objective Holiness due to its doctrines, laws, sacraments and aims, even if all of its members are not living perfectly holy lives. St. Paul speaks about this when he addresses those who are “called to be saints” (*Rom. 1:17*) or those “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (*1Cor. 1:2*). In spite of the sins committed by its members which he condemns (*1Cor. 5:4-6*), St. Paul still recognizes the community as holy.

An analogy that can help us understand this is that of a university. A university may have an excellent academic standing and reputation even if some of its students may not excel to the standard of that particular university.

c) Catholic:

This word is derived from the Greek word *katholikos* which denotes both universal and orthodox as opposed to particular and heretical. St. Cyril of Jerusalem gives an explanation of this particular note saying: “The Church is called ‘Catholic’ because it extends through all the world, from one end of the earth to another. Also because it teaches universally and without omission all the doctrines which ought to come to man’s knowledge, about things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings under the sway of true religion all classes of men, rulers and subjects, learned and ignorant; and because it universally treats and cures every type of sin, committed by means of soul and body, and possesses in itself every kind of virtue which can be named, in deeds and words, and spiritual gifts of every kind” (*Catechetical Lectures 18:23*).

d) Apostolic:

This denotes that the Church descended from the Apostles by a due succession. Many of the early fathers of the Church emphasized this particular point from the times of the Apostolic Fathers, the immediate successors of the Apostles of Christ, such as St.

Clement of Rome before the end of the first century (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 44). Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, in the 2nd century gives a clear testimony to this succession when he writes: “It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the churches, and to demonstrate the successions of these men to our own times” (*The Church*, p. 102).

“The episcopate is thus held to create a historical link between the Church of the Apostolic times and that of today and is both the means and assurance of the continuity of office and of transmission of grace; and on these grounds the episcopate descended from the Apostles is the guarantee of the Apostolicity of the Church” (*Vienna Dialogue*, p. 45).

2) The Body of Christ:

- St. Paul repeatedly speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ:
- + “so we, being many, are **one body in Christ**, and individually members of one another” (*Rom.* 12:5).
 - + “For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread” (*1Cor.* 10:17).
 - + “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member but many... But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body... Now **you are the body of Christ, and members individually**” (*1Cor.* 12:12-27).
 - + “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling” (*Eph.* 4:4).
 - + “... **Christ is head of the church**; and He is the Savior of the body... Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish... no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For **we are members of His body**, of His flesh and of His bones. ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (*Eph.* 5:23-32).
 - + “**And He is the head of the body, the church**, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (*Col.* 1:18).
 - + “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of **His body, which is the church**” (*Col.* 1:24).

By speaking of the Church as the Body of Christ, St. Paul is teaching us that in order to be one with Christ, we must be members of His Body, i.e. the Church. This is the desire of our Lord Jesus Christ: “...that they may be one as We are” (*John* 17:11). And it is this unity that grants the believers to be with Him in the eternal life: “Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as **You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him**. And this

is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.... Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, **that they may be one as We are...** I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; **that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, ... Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am...**" (*John 17*). Therefore, salvation and eternal life are founded upon being members of His Body, the Church.

There are several steps that must occur in order to become a member in His Body:

a) Faith in the One God, i.e. the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (*Eph. 4:4-6*).

b) Repentance and Confession: "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call'" (*Acts 2:38-39*).

"Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God" (*2Cor. 6:14-16*).

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us" (*1John 1:8-10*).

"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders [i.e. presbyters] of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (*James 5:14-16*).

c) Baptism: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (*John 3:3, 5*).

"Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Rom. 6:3-11*).

“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (*1Cor.* 12:13).

“In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (*Col.* 2:11-12). It is important to note here that according to the covenant God had given Abraham, if a male was not circumcised, he could not be considered one of the people of God (*Gen.* 17:1-14). Furthermore, the uncircumcised were not allowed to partake of the Passover Lamb (*Ex.* 12:43-49) because they were not a part of the people of God. St. Paul teaches us that the circumcision of the New Testament is the spiritual circumcision of baptism of all believers through which we die with Christ and are risen with Him in order to become a new creation (*2Cor.* 5:17) having put on Christ (*Gal.* 3:27).

d) Confirmation: Confirmation is the seal of the Holy Spirit that consecrates and sets apart the newly baptized for Christ. This seal is the sign that we belong to Christ and have been given the promise of the inheritance as sons of God.

+ “Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (*2Cor.* 1:21-22).

+ “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory” (*Eph.* 1:13-14).

+ “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (*Eph.* 4:30).

+ “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things” (*1John* 2:20).

+ “But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him” (*1John* 2:27).

By the grace of receiving the Holy Spirit, the newly baptized becomes attached to Christ as the branch to the True Vine, therefore becoming one in His Body: “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned” (*John* 15:1-6).

+ “He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you” (*John* 16:14-15).

St. Paul clearly states this mystery of the Church and how the Holy Spirit makes the believers, both the Israelites and the Gentiles, one in the Body of Christ when he writes: “For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the

middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (*Eph. 2:14-22*).

Here it is important to note that the Church, the Body of Christ is outside of time and space. Therefore, the heavenly and the earthly, those who have reposed in the faith of Christ since the beginning and the believers still in the flesh, are all one in the Body of Christ. **There are not two Churches**, one heavenly and victorious and another earthly and struggling, but rather one Church and one Body in Christ.

e) **Eucharist**: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me” (*John 6:53-57*).

+ “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread” (*1Cor. 10:16-17*).

St. Cyril of Alexandria writes concerning this: “By means of one body he blesses those who believe in him and incorporates them in himself and in each other; and that body is his own. And who can divide and remove them from this mutual union of nature, when they have been bound together in unity with Christ by means of that one holy body? We all partake of one loaf, and so we are all made into one body: for Christ cannot be divided. Therefore the Church is called the ‘Body of Christ, of which each individual is a member’ as Paul understands. For we are all united to the one Christ, by means of his holy body, since we take him, the one and indivisible, in our own bodies... If we are all incorporated with one another in Christ, not only with one another but also with him who comes within us by means of his own flesh, then surely it is clear that we are all of us one, both with one another and in Christ. For Christ is the bond of unity, since he is God and man in one and the same person” (*Commentary on St. John 17:20-21, Book 11, chapter 11; quoted in Vienna Dialogue, p. 46*).

Therefore, “the Church of God is one and indivisible Body of Christ wholly and indivisibly present in each church, i.e. in the visible unity of the people of God, the Bishop and the Eucharist. Every local church manifests all the fullness of the Church of God, because it is the Church of God and not just one part of it. The plurality of local Churches does not destroy the unity of the Church of God, just as the plurality of Eucharistic assemblies does not destroy the unity of the Eucharist in time and space” (*Vienna Dialogue, p. 46*).

III. TYPES AND SYMBOLS OF THE CHURCH

Besides speaking of the Church as the Body of Christ, the Holy Bible and the fathers of the Church present to us other types and symbols of the Church that help us understand the relationship of the Church to Christ and the salvation that occurs through the Church.

1) Christ is the Shepherd and the Church is His Sheepfold:

Our Lord Jesus Christ said: “I am the good shepherd” (*John* 10:11, 14). Along with this He speaks about the Church, the believers, as His sheepfold – not only those who have believed in Him, but those who will believe in Him: “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own... And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd” (*John* 10:14, 16). He also contrasts between those who believe in Him, i.e. His sheep, and those who do not believe in Him, i.e. those not of the sheepfold: “Then the Jews surrounded Him and said to Him, ‘How long do You keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father’s name, they bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand. I and My Father are one’” (*John* 10:24-30).

The same analogy is used by the Apostles to speak of not only Christ and the Church, but also the bishops who were consecrated and given the breath of the Holy Spirit to be overseers (Gk. *episkopos*) in the Church:

+ “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 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; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away” (*1Pet.* 5:1-4).

+ “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).

2) Bride of Christ:

The people of Israel in the Old Testament were often described as a virgin, bride or a wife that was in a marriage bond with God. This was to signify the love of God for His people, His care for and protection of them, and their dedication to God and Him alone. When the people of Israel sinned against God and began worshipping the false gods of the peoples and nations around them, they were spoken of as having committed adultery and betrayed God Who was like the bridegroom or husband that loved them and honored them. This type of love relationship of a husband and wife or the bridegroom and his bride is emphasized greatly in the *Song of Songs* besides many other verses.

This analogy continues into the New Testament when the Church is being described as the Bride of Christ. St. John the Baptist speaks of himself as the friend of the bridegroom that rejoices at the voice of the bridegroom, i.e. Christ: “He who has the

bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled" (*John 3:29*).

St. Paul goes further into this analogy when he says that the relationship of a husband and wife should be modeled after the relationship of Christ and the Church, His bride: "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church" (*Eph. 5:22-32*).

This analogy continues into the *Revelation* when the Lamb, i.e. Christ, is presented as the bridegroom and the Church, His Bride, and the fulfillment of Her deliverance at the end of the days will be like a wedding feast:

+ "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, 'Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!'" (*Rev. 19:7-9*).

+ "Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God'" (*Rev. 21:2-3*).

+ "Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife'. And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God..." (*Rev. 21:9-11*). In the verses following this passage there is a more detailed description of the holy Jerusalem.

+ "And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!'" (*Rev. 22:17*).

Not only the Church as a whole is described as a virgin and bride for Christ, but each believer is supposed to have the spirit of the chaste virgin wholly dedicated to Christ: "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (*2Cor. 11:2*).

Given the emphasis on and the beauty of this analogy in the Holy Bible, many of the Church fathers wrote about Christ, the Bridegroom, and the Church, His Bride. We will just quote a sample of these sayings:

"Christ alone, then, is the bridegroom to Whom the Church, His bride, comes from the nations and gives herself in wedlock; aforesaid poor and starving, but now rich

with Christ's harvest; gathering in the hidden bosom of her mind handfuls of the rich crop and gleanings of the Word, that so she may nourish with fresh food her who is worn out, bereaved by the death of her son, and starving, even the mother of the dead people, -- leaving not the widow and destitute, whilst she seeks new children" (St. Ambrose, *On the Christian Faith* III:72; quoted in *NPNF*, 2nd series, vol. 10, p. 253).

"The bride of Christ cannot be defiled. She is inviolated and chaste. She knows one home only; in all modesty she keeps faithfully to one bridal chamber. It is she who preserves us for God, she who seals for the kingdom the sons born to her. Whoever breaks with the Church and enters on an adulterous union cuts himself off from the promises made to the Church. He who turns his back on the Church of Christ will not come to the rewards of Christ; he is an alien, a worldling, an enemy. You cannot have God for your Father if you no longer have the Church for your mother" (St. Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* 6; quoted in *The Church*, pp. 50-51).

3) The Church is the Mother of the Believers:

Our Lord Jesus Christ describes baptism as being "born again" and being "born of water and the Spirit" when He says: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (*John* 3:3, 5). Therefore, the Church is the Mother of all the believers since it is through Her that we receive the spiritual birth in baptism at the hands of the priest.

Clement of Alexandria in the 3rd century writes: "'Their children', Scripture says, 'shall be put upon the shoulders, and they shall be comforted held on the knees, as a mother comforts, so will I comfort you' (*Isaiah* 66:12-13). A mother draws her children close to her. We seek our mother, the Church (*Paidagogos*, 1.5, 21, *SC* 70.148; quoted in *The Church*, p. 46).

St. Cyprian of Carthage also writes: "You cannot have God for your Father if you no longer have the Church for your mother" (*On the Unity of the Catholic Church* 6; quoted in *The Church*, pp. 50-51).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem says: "Do not be satisfied to ask, 'Where is the church?', but rather, 'Where is the Catholic Church?' For that assuredly is the name of this holy church, the mother of us all. She is the bride of the Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God (as it is written, 'As Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her' (*Eph.* 5:25). She also presents the image and form of 'Jerusalem which is above', which is free and the mother of us all, once barren but now the mother of many children (cf. *Gal.* 4:26-27)" (*Catechetical Lectures* 18:26; quoted in *The Church*, p. 51).

4) Noah's Ark:

The type of Noah's ark has a great eschatological significance as emphasized by our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself: "But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (*Matt.* 24:37-39; see also *Luke* 17:26-27).

St. Peter also continues with this type, not just in terms of its fulfillment in the end of the days (*2Pet.* 2:5; 3:6) but also in terms of who will be saved: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to

death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him” (*1Pet. 3:18-22*).

Therefore, the fathers of the Church considered that Noah’s ark was a type of the Church and that unless one is baptized and a member in the Church that person cannot be saved. St. Cyprian writes: “If there was any escape for anyone who was outside the Ark of Noah, there will be the same for one found outside the Church. The Lord warns us when He says: ‘He that is not with me is against me, and he that gathers not with me scatters’ (*Matt. 12:30*)” (St. Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* 6; quoted in *The Church*, p. 51). St. Cyprian also writes: “Just as in that baptism of the world by which the ancient iniquity was purged, the one who was not in the ark could not be saved through water, so now anyone who has not been baptized in the church cannot be saved, for the church has been founded in the unity of the Lord, as the sacrament of the one ark” (*Letters 74:11*; quoted in *ACCS, New Testament*, vol. XI, p. 109).

5) The Temple, the City of God, the New Jerusalem:

In the Old Testament, the tabernacle and later the temple were made for there to be a consecrated and holy place that signified that God was dwelling with His people. It was in this place where the Ark of the Covenant and other holy items were, such as the altar of incense, the lampstand, the table of showbread, and the altar of burnt offering where sacrifices were offered on a daily basis. However, it was not just the tabernacle or the temple that were considered holy and consecrated for God, but also the entire people of Israel. And also, all of Jerusalem, the city where the temple was, was considered to be holy.

The Church in the New Testament was considered to be the spiritual temple of God, not made by hands, but redeemed by the blood of Christ as St. Paul explains in *Hebrews*: “But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” (*Heb. 9:11-15*).

St. Paul makes it clear that this tabernacle, or temple, or city of God, not made by hands was not just referring to Christ Himself, but to the Church also, the Body of Christ: “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, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just

men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel” (*Heb.* 12:22-24).

Therefore, whoever is a member of the Church is a citizen of the kingdom of heaven: “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (*Eph.* 2:19-22).

The *Revelation* in chapters 21 and 22 also presents the Church as the New Jerusalem, the city of God. It is important to note here that there is no temple in the heavenly Jerusalem, because Christ Himself, the Lamb of God, is the Temple Who became the everlasting sacrifice that atones for the sins of the world and sanctified His Church, His bride.

The tabernacle, temple, or city of God were each considered God’s dwelling with men. So wherever the Holy Spirit dwells, this is considered to be a temple for God, where spiritual sacrifices are to be offered. This is why St. Paul speaks of each of the believers in the Church who have received the Holy Spirit, not just the Church as a whole, as temples of the Holy Spirit: “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are” (*1Cor.* 3:16-17); “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (*1Cor.* 6:19-20); “And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (*2Cor.* 6:16).

REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

- 1) *Holy Bible*, New King James Version, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1992.
- 2) *ANF = Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Roberts, A., Donaldson, J., Schaff, P., Wace, H., Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994.
- 3) *The Church = The Church (Message of the Fathers of the Church 4)*, ed. Halton, Thomas, Michael Glazier, Inc., 1985.
- 4) *Vienna Dialogue = Emile Maher Ishak, Oriental Orthodox Ecclesiology and the Search for Communion between East and West*, in: *Pro Oriente* (ed.), the Vienna Dialogue on Ecclesiology. Third Study Seminar July 1994. Vienna 1995 (=Booklet 7).
- 5) *SC = Sources chretiennes*
- 6) *ACCS = Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, ed. Oden, Thomas C., Intersarsity Press.

QUESTIONS:

1) In what ways would you define and/or describe the Church to someone who does not have the proper understanding of what the Church is?

2) How does salvation occur through the Church?