

Can the Church Save?

What is the role of the church in salvation? Does it play a part in reconciling the lost sinner to God? Can it atone for our sins? Is it possible to put the church in the place of God?

Are you “other” than Jesus Christ? It may seem a strange question, but it is important. It is plain that you are not Jesus Christ. Neither am I. Both of us are “other” than Christ.

So when Peter said there was no salvation in any “other” than Jesus Christ, he left no room for you, or for me, or for a whole church full of us to think of ourselves as saviors. Speaking of Christ, Peter insisted: “*Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*” (Acts 4:5–12).

Neither of us can “save” the other. Both of us together cannot “save” a single soul, nor could a vast assembly of people just like us. Even though Jesus Christ may live in us, we are still not saviors.

Forgive me if I seem to belabor the point, but there are those who believe that the church is somehow an active agent in salvation. But the church is not Jesus Christ, and therefore is not your savior.

Consider the following propositions:

1. The church did not die for us: “God commends His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, *Christ* died for us” (Romans 5:8).

2. The church does not reconcile us to God: “Much more then, being now justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if, when we were enemies, *we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son*, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 5:9–10).

3. The church makes no atonement: “And not only so; but we also joy in God through *our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement*” (Romans 5:11).

4. The church does not sanctify us: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; *That He might sanctify and cleanse it...*” (Ephesians 5:25). The church cannot sanctify—it must *be* sanctified by Jesus Christ.

Beside all these, the church cannot regenerate us; nor can it heal us when we are sick. And no one has ever suggested that the church can raise us from the dead.

Justification, salvation, reconciliation, atonement all require the shedding of blood, and the church does not bleed for us.

Well, then, does the church play *any* role in salvation?

Indeed it does. The church is the *object* of salvation. The church must *be* saved, sanctified, atoned for, reconciled to God, cleansed, protected, nourished, taught, led—all by Jesus Christ who is the head of the church.

To cast the church in the role of the one who can save, the one who can justify, the one who can make you right with God, is to put the church in the place of Christ. To make the church a savior is to make an idol of the church.

All of this needs to be said because so many are confused about the nature and work of the church.

Then what, exactly, is the church?

First, we have already seen what the church is not. The church is not Jesus Christ, even though it is sometimes referred to as “the body of Christ.” It is commonly assumed that this means the church is the fingers, toes, arms, and legs of Jesus Christ—that it is not merely close to Him, but that it somehow *is* Him.

But when Paul and others speak of the church as “the body of Christ,” they are using a simple metaphor. *Soma*—the Greek word for body—is used commonly in classical and koine Greek, not only for the physical body of man, but metaphorically for a group of people, a society, a family, or any sociological structure.

In the Bible, the church is presented metaphorically as a human body. It can be compared to a human body in some respects but it is not a human body; nor is it the body in which Christ walked the earth. It is not His flesh, His blood, His bones, or

His life.

Jesus said He would build His church, but the church is no more Jesus Christ than a building is a builder. It is His church. It is the church of God, the church that belongs and pertains to God. But the church is not God.

Very well, the church is not God. What is it?

The church is an assembly—and it is right here that much of our confusion arises.

The Greek word *ecclesia* is the word that is frequently translated in the New Testament as “church.” But it is not that simple. In the first place, the word *ecclesia* comes from two words in the Greek—*ek* (which means “out”) and *kaleo* (which means “I call”).

So far, so good. The Greek word we translate “church” comes from a root meaning “to call out.” When the Greeks called people out to a meeting, they called this meeting an *ecclesia*—an assembly. Hence, members of one denomination, eschewing the term “church,” call themselves the “Assemblies of God.”

It is a simple exercise to take your Bible and a concordance and look up the word “church.” Try to substitute the word “assembly” everywhere you find it, and you will begin to think of the church in different terms.

If you were able to look up the Greek word *ecclesia*, you would see things even more clearly. For example, the word is used in Acts 19:32 and 41, but no translation includes the word “church” in these verses. Here the word refers to an unruly crowd.

In the same passage, the speaker refers to a “lawful assembly,” which could hear matters much like a court of law. The Greek word for “assembly” is *ecclesia*, but it is obviously not what we mean when we say “church.”

The Universal Church

One of the more serious errors of the Christian religion is the teaching that the church is universal (the word *catholic* means “universal”). The idea is that there can only be one true church, and therefore every Christian who has ever lived must be a member of that one church. Any other church must by definition be a false church, and every member of a false church a false Christian.

The first Christian assembly was in Jerusalem. Later we find an assembly in Antioch. Not long afterward we find more assemblies established in

Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia. Later on we find Paul writing a letter to a church in Philippi. We find one in Thessalonica. We find churches in Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Pergamos, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

In fact, there are references to over 25 churches (assemblies) in the New Testament.

How then can anyone argue that there is only *one* true church? They can make the case that we are one in Christ, but this oneness cannot be dependent upon our own, fallible organizational structures. There can be true Christians in the world of whom we are blissfully unaware, who have the Spirit of Christ, who obey the truth, and even who have their own unique set of errors.

Where did we get the idea that there is only one true church? It is plain that the universal church concept doesn’t arise out of Scripture. Where then?

The answer lies exposed in the pages of church history. Even the short fifty page summary in *Halley’s Bible Handbook* is most revealing.

In its earliest history, the church is anything but one. The reason has little to do with dogma or organization. There just was no way to keep up with the proliferation of the scattered church all over the known world.

Tertullian (A.D. 160–220), wrote, “We are of yesterday. Yet we have filled your empire, your cities, your towns, your islands, your tribes, your camps, castles, palaces, assemblies and senate.” By the end of the second century, Christians of whatever stripe numbered about one-half the population of the Roman Empire.

It is astonishing when you consider the limited resources of the early Christians. They had no mass media. They had no international communications network to keep them united. They had no church buildings. During much of this time, they had to hide out in fear of their lives. Yet Christians were everywhere.

Then a man named Constantine came on the scene.

“In the course of his wars with competitors to establish himself on the throne, on the eve of the battle of Milvian Bridge, just outside Rome (October 27, A.D. 312), [Constantine] saw in the sky just above the setting sun, a vision of the cross, and above it the words, ‘In this sign conquer.’ He decided to fight under the banner of Christ and he

won the battle, a turning point in the history of Christianity" (*Hailey's Bible Handbook*, p. 759).

Remember that before this date, there was no universal organization or structure to the church. There was no recognized hierarchy to govern the church. Collections of churches had been directed by the apostle or evangelist who first preached the gospel to the area. It is plain from Paul's letters that the early church was loosely and informally structured.

Constantine changed all that with his Edict of Toleration (A.D. 313): "By this edict, Constantine granted to 'Christians and to all others full liberty of following that religion which each may choose,' the first edict of its kind in history. He went farther. He favored Christians in every way; he filled chief offices with them, he exempted Christian ministers from taxes and military service, he encouraged and helped in building churches; he made Christianity the religion of his court; issued a general exhortation in A.D. 325 to all of his subjects to embrace Christianity and because the Roman aristocracy persisted in adhering to their pagan customs he moved his capital to Byzantium and called it Constantinople or New Rome the capital of the New Christian Empire" (*ibid*).

Later Constantine made Sunday the official day of rest for the empire. He forbade ordinary work on that day, and permitted the soldiers to attend church.

The first church building was erected in the reign of Alexander Severus early in the second century, but it was probably the only one until after the edict of Constantine when they began to be built everywhere.

Constantine had merely allowed everyone to choose his own religion. Emperor Theodosius (A.D. 378–398) made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire, and made church membership compulsory.

For three hundred years you had to hide out if you were a Christian. After Theodosius, you had to hide out if you were not a Christian.

Many claim this is the worst calamity that ever befell the church, because it filled the church with unregenerate people. But it was a logical step toward creating a universal church.

"Theodosius undertook the forcible suppression of all other religions, and prohibited idol worship. Under his decrees heathen temples were tom down by mobs of Christians and there was much blood-

shed. Christ had desired to conquer by purely spiritual and moral means. Up to this time conversion was voluntary, a genuine change in heart and life. But now *the military spirit of imperial Rome had entered the church*" (Halley, p. 760, emphasis mine throughout).

To all appearances, the church had won. It had conquered the Roman Empire and all its pagan religions. But in truth, the church had been made over into the image of the Roman Empire. It adopted its spirit, its methods, its government.

Constantine did not experience conversion and become a Christian. Rather he appropriated, grasped, and possessed the Christian religion, taking over its church, taking over its leadership, appointing its hierarchy, so that the bishops of the visible church owed their allegiance and loyalty to him. *Constantine, not the bishop of Rome, was the head of the church.*

"The imperial church of the fourth and fifth centuries had become an entirely different institution from the persecuted church of the first three centuries. In its ambition to rule it lost and forgot the spirit of Christ" (Halley, p. 760).

According to Halley, "The church was founded, not as an institution of authority to force the name and teaching of Christ on the world, but only as a witness-bearing institution to Christ, to hold Him before the people. *Christ Himself, not the church, is the transforming power in human life.* But the church was founded in the Roman Empire and gradually developed a form of government like the political world in which it existed becoming a vast, autocratic organization ruled from the top" (p. 767, emphasis mine).

At the pinnacle of this hierarchy sat a man who came to be called the "Pope." The word *pope* comes from the Latin for father—*papa*. At first it was applied to all western bishops. They were all called *papa*, because they were a father figure to the churches they served.

About A.D. 500 this term began to be restricted to the bishop of Rome. Even though the Roman Catholic list of popes includes the bishops of Rome from the first century onward, for nearly 500 years bishops of Rome were not popes in the universal sense. The idea that the bishop of Rome should have authority over the whole church was a slow development, and was bitterly contested at every step.

The early Roman bishops tried to assert their authority beyond Rome. Anicetus (154–168) tried to influence Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, to change the date of Easter observance, but Polycarp refused to yield. Victor I, who was bishop of Rome from 190–202, threatened to excommunicate the eastern churches for celebrating Easter on the fourteenth of Nisan. Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, replied that he was not afraid of Victor's threats and asserted his independent authority. Irenaeus of Lyons rebuked Victor for trying to dictate to the eastern churches. Even though he agreed, he still thought the bishop of Rome had no business threatening to excommunicate people because of what they were doing. Calixtus I (218–223) was the first to base his claim to the primacy on Matthew 16:18—that is, on the primacy of Peter. Tertullian, of Carthage, called him a usurper in speaking as if he was a bishop of bishops (Halley, p. 768).

So the struggle continued, but the feeling grew that Rome, as the capital city, should be head of the church, even as it was head of the empire.

But a man finally became the "head of the church." It was Constantine. He regarded himself as head of the church—all of the church—worldwide.

It was Constantine who called the first worldwide council of the church—the Council of Nicaea—and presided over it. This council accorded the bishops of Alexandria and Antioch full jurisdiction over their provinces, as the Roman bishop had over his. They were subject to Constantine, not the Roman bishop.

By the end of the fourth century the churches and bishops of Christendom had come to be largely dominated from five great centers—Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. Bishops in each of these places had come to be called patriarchs of equal authority with one another, each having full control of his own province. There was no pope. The Roman emperor was the head of this church.

After the division of the empire in 395, the patriarchs of Antioch Jerusalem and Alexandria gradually came to acknowledge the leadership of Constantinople. There was still no papacy. There was no universal church—no Holy Roman Catholic

Church.

Which is not say that no one tried. Innocent I (402–417) called himself "ruler of the church of God" and claimed the right to settle the more important matters of controversy in the whole church.

Papal Claims

Later, as the western empire began to fall apart, Augustine wrote *The City of God* in which he envisioned a universal Christian empire.

It was Leo I (A.D. 440) who came to be first true pope. "The misfortunes of the empire were his opportunity. The East was rent with controversies. The West, under weak emperors, was breaking up. He claimed that he was, by divine appointment, primate of all bishops. He obtained from Emperor Valentinian III imperial recognition for his claim" (Halley, p. 770).

And so the first real pope owed his power and authority, not to Jesus of Nazareth, but "to the Roman emperor.

"He proclaimed himself lord of the whole church; advocated exclusive universal papacy; said that resistance to

his authority was a sure way to hell; advocated the death penalty for heresy."

In time, the papacy, which originally depended on the emperor for its power, was strong enough to grant power to the emperor. Leo III (A.D. 795) appointed Charlemagne as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

Nicolas I (858) was the first pope to wear a crown. "To promote his claim of universal authority he used with great effect the 'Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals,' a book that appeared about A.D. 857 containing documents that purported to be letters and decrees of bishops and councils of the second and third centuries, all tending to exalt the power of the pope. They were deliberate forgeries and corruptions of ancient historical documents, but their spurious character was not discovered until some centuries later.... The papacy, which was the growth of several centuries, was made to appear as something complete and unchangeable, from the very beginning" (Halley, p. 773).

This may have been the most colossal literary fraud in history, but it strengthened the papacy

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more than any other one agency.

Why was such a fraud perpetrated? It was nothing more than a means to retain control of people. It did not have its roots in the Bible, in truth, in the teachings of Christ. It had its roots in necessity. It was the only way the pope could acquire and retain the power he wanted.

But the increase in power did not improve the papacy. What follows is a time so filled with bribery, corruption, immorality, and bloodshed that it is called the blackest chapter in the entire history of the church.

Sergius III (A.D. 904–911) was said to have had a mistress named Marozia. She, her mother Theodora, and her sister, filled the papal chair with their paramours and bastard sons, and turned the papal palace into a den of robbers. It's called in history the rule of the harlots (904–963).

“John X was brought from Ravenna to Rome and made pope by Theodora for the more convenient gratification of her passion. He was smothered to death by Marozia, who, then, in succession, raised to the papacy Leo VI, and Stephen VII and John X, her own illegitimate son. Another of her sons appointed the four following popes, Leo VII, Stephen VIII, Martin III, Agapetus II. John XII, a grandson of Marozia, was guilty of almost every crime, violated virgins and widows, high and low, lived with his father's mistress, made the papal palace a brothel, was killed while in the act of adultery by the woman's enraged husband” (Halley, p. 774).

The summit of papal power probably came in the reign of Innocent III (1198–1216)—called the most powerful of any pope that ever lived. He claimed to be “The Vicar of Christ, the Vicar of God, Supreme Sovereign over the Church and the World.” He claimed the right to depose kings and princes, and that all things on earth and in heaven and in hell are subject to the Vicar of Christ.

“He brought the church into supreme control of the state. The kings of Germany, France, England, and practically all the monarchs of Europe obeyed his will. He even brought the Byzantine empire under his control. Never in history has any one man exerted more power. He ordered two crusades. Decreed transubstantiation [that is, he declared that

the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper actually became the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ upon consecration]. He confirmed auricular confession. Declared that Peter's successor can never in any way depart from the Catholic faith, papal infallibility, he condemned the Magna Charta, forbade the reading of the Bible in vernacular. He ordered the extermination of heretics. Instituted the inquisition. Ordered the massacre of the Albigenses. More blood was shed under his direction, and that of his immediate successors, than in any other period of church history, except in the papacy's effort to crush the reformation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One would think Nero, the beast, had come to life in the name of the lamb” (Halley, p. 776, compare Revelation 13:11).

The Inquisition, called the holy office, was an invention of Innocent III. “It was the church court for detection and punishment of heretics. Under it

everyone was required to inform against heretics. Anyone suspected was liable to torture, without knowing the name of his accuser. The proceedings were secret. The inquisitor pronounced sentence, and the victim was turned over to civil authorities

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to be imprisoned for life or to be burned” (ibid.).

That sounds utterly incredible, but be assured it is true. The inquisition continued not merely for a year or two, but for decades.

All of this is the logical consequence of the idea of a universal church. If we insist that we are the true church, that we are all there is to the church, that everyone who is outside of this church is a heretic, that everyone who leaves the church is bound for hellfire, then we can justify extreme measures to maintain the integrity of the church. We can conclude that a person who is causing trouble in this church—who causes some little one to fall away—is a spiritual murderer. We can decide that any action we wish to take against this person is justified. And if we have the power of the state behind us, we can even enforce the death penalty upon a heretic.

How far can it go? Boniface VIII (1294–1303) in his famous *Unum Sanctam* said, “We declare, affirm, define, and pronounce that it is altogether necessary for salvation that every creature be sub-

ject to the Roman Pontiff.”

The man who made this declaration was so corrupt that Dante, who visited Rome during his pontificate, called the Vatican a sewer of corruption and, in his “Divine Comedy,” assigned Boniface VIII, Nicolas III, and Clement V to the lowest parts of hell.

“Leo X was pope when Martin Luther started the Protestant Reformation. He was made an archbishop at eight, a cardinal at thirteen. Was appointed to 27 different church offices. He was taught to regard ecclesiastical office purely as a source of revenue. He bargained for the papal chair. He sold church honors. All ecclesiastical offices were for sale, and many new ones were created. He appointed cardinals as young as seven.... He maintained the most luxurious and licentious court in Europe. His cardinals vied with kings and princes in gorgeous palaces and voluptuous entertainment, attended by trains of servants” (Halley, p. 780).

Yet this man reaffirmed the *Unum Sanctam* in which it was declared that every human being must be subject to the Roman pontiff for salvation. What do you suppose his object was? Control. What he was demanding was absolute obedience to his every demand at the cost of rotting in hell for all eternity.

Of course, none of this is supported in the Scriptures, so Clement XI issued a bull against Bible reading.

“Leo XII (1821–9) condemned all religious freedom, tolerance, Bible societies, and Bible translations, and declared that everyone separated from the Roman Catholic church, however unblameable in other respects, has no part in eternal life” (Halley, p. 781).

This goes right to the heart of the matter. Membership in the body of the one universal church is the ultimate qualifier for salvation—no matter what else may be right or wrong with your life.

This idea dies hard. If we are to understand it, we have to understand where it came from—and what motivated it. It originated with a political machine doing its dead level best to control, not merely the people of the church, but the staggering wealth and power of the church.

The popes who instituted these practices cared little for the ordinary folk of the church. These doctrines, threats, and policies were intended to intimi-

date men of power both within and without the hierarchy of the church. *But* these policies in the hands of petty administrators wreaked havoc with the people.

“Pius IX (1846–78) lost the papal states, decreed papal infallibility; proclaimed the right to suppress heresy by force, condemned separation of church and state, commanded Catholics to obey the head of the church rather than civil rulers, denounced liberty of conscience, liberty of worship, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, decreed the immaculate conception and deity of Mary; condemned Bible societies, declared that Protestantism is no form of the Christian religion; and that every dogma of the Roman Catholic church has been dictated by Christ through His viceregents on earth” (Halley, p. 781).

When Pius IX called the Vatican Council in 1870 it was for the express purpose of having himself declared infallible. The decree reads that it is divinely revealed that the pope, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, is possessed of infallibility in defining doctrines of faith and morals, and that such definitions are irrefragable.

Why did it take so long for the pope to be declared infallible? The reason is simple. The concept of a universal church took time to bear fruit. It was only as the church came to be perceived as universal that the natural consequences of this began to be felt. If there was only one true church that was governed internally by one individual, then that one individual must make all the final decisions. Consequently God cannot let this man err or else the church might fall into error and fall away.

The doctrines of papal infallibility and the primacy of Peter are logical consequences of the doctrine of a universal church.

How far can these errors go? Leo XIII (1878–1901) claimed that he was appointed to be head of all rulers (king of kings?) and that he holds on this earth the place of Almighty God. Pius XI reaffirmed the Roman Catholic Church to be the only church of Christ, *and the reunion of Christendom impossible except by submission to Rome*.

Halley summarized by saying: “The papacy is an Italian institution. It arose on the ruins of the Roman Empire, in the name of Christ occupying the throne of the Caesars [instead of the throne of David]; a revival of the image of the Roman

Empire come to life in the garb of Christianity” (p. 783).

When we understand that Rome is the “beast” of Revelation 13, it is plain that any church that allowed itself to be infected by the spirit of Rome, that adopted the governmental structure and methods of Rome, would have taken upon itself the “image of the beast” (Revelation 13:14–15).

Halley concludes that the papacy is not the church. “*It is a political machine that got control of the church, and by assumed prerogatives, interposed itself between God and God’s people*” (p. 784).

But why would men do this? The answer is deceptively simple. They did it to retain power. The doctrinal changes introduced by the bishops of Rome were brought in during times of crisis. They were solutions to problems. They were the answers to difficulties that were faced by the church at specific points in time. The earliest bishops had no idea where they would lead, and the later popes were blind to much of what they were doing.

Barbara Tuchman, after analyzing the reigns of the four successive popes leading up the Protestant Reformation, asked why not one of them even considered instituting reforms: “They were deaf to disaffection, blind to the alternative ideas it gave rise to, blandly impervious to challenge, unconcerned by the dismay at their misconduct and the rising wrath at their misgovernment, fixed in refusal to change, almost stupidly stubborn in maintaining a corrupt existing system. *They could not change it because they were part of it, grew out of it, depended on it*” (*March of Folly*, p. 125).

It seems likely that many of the popes thought they were doing the right thing for the church and its people. They were trying to *save* the people from the devil, from the Roman Empire, from adversity, from heresy. But in trying to make the church and its hierarchy the savior of the people, they finally put themselves in the place of Christ.

And this is the ultimate perversion of the purpose of the church.

Why a Church?

We have seen vividly what the church is not supposed to be. It should be indelibly printed in our minds. But Jesus promised to build His church, so He must have had a purpose in mind. What was the church for?

The role of the church and its people is to bear witness of Jesus Christ and to care for one another. It’s that simple.

Bearing witness for Jesus Christ involves proclaiming the gospel and living a life that shines as a light in a darkened world. It involves being ready to give an answer of the hope that is within you with meekness and with fear. It involves a love for other people, a willingness to share what you have with them. It involves a support for those who are actually on the front line doing the witnessing.

Caring for one another involves visiting the widows and fatherless in their affliction. It involves vigilance to see that church members who are downhearted are not left alone.

It involves seeing to it that the hungry are fed and that fatherless children are taught and cared for. It means insuring that the boy that doesn’t have a father to take him camping has some other father to stand in the gap.

These are the duties of the church. This is the role the church plays in the salvation of us all.

When I look at what the church can do and what it has done, I have to ask, *Can this church also become corrupt?*

Yes, any church can become corrupt. We have hard evidence of it in the New Testament. The Galatian church was part of the true church, and it had been corrupted. By the time Paul wrote the epistle, the church was nearly gone.

Suppose you had been a member in Galatia and that you had stayed faithful to the truth even though the rest of the church had not done so. What would your relationship to God have been? Could you be a Christian and not be in that particular church?

John wrote a very revealing letter to a friend who happened to be in that very situation: “The elder unto the well beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. Beloved, I wish above all things that you may prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers, For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, even as you walk in the truth” (3 John 1). Bear in mind that this letter is not addressed to a church, but to an individual. There had already been letters to the church and those letters had been rejected.

“I wrote to the church,” John continued, “but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, receives us not. Wherefore if I come, I will remember his deeds which he does, prating

against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and *casteth them out of the church*" (verse 10).

Diotrephes was trying to *save* the church from these brethren and using excommunication as tool to do it. We might guess at his motives, but John leaves little doubt. It is one of the very early illustrations of vicious church politics used to retain control.

Now for some simple questions:

Is the church always right? Of course not. The assembly we call the church is composed of people, and people make mistakes. There are elders in the assembly who are supposed to help us, but Diotrephes shows us what can happen to an elder. No, the church is *not* always right.

Are you ever justified in following the assembly (the church) in doing wrong? Plainly, no.

Can you be expelled from the church and still make it into God's kingdom? Yes, you can. *The church cannot give you salvation, and the church cannot take it away.*

Those who assume the church can excommunicate you and somehow bar you from salvation have forgotten one of the most basic teachings of Jesus Christ: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, *neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.* My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all: and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:27).

There are no exceptions. No man—not a minister, not a deacon, not a collection of people, not a church, not an entire assembly of people all of whom claim to be Christians. And you can thank God for that.

There's more: "We know that all things work

together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called" (Romans 8:28).

The church did not call them. The church cannot make that kind of decision. Only God can call a person to His church.

"And whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things. Who

shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies. Who is he that condemns? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from

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the love of Christ?"

Who indeed? Who can make the decision that you're cut off, that you are no longer to have access to the love of Christ? Who can prevent Him from interceding with the Father for you? Is this something the *church* is supposed to do?

We have always known better. But somehow, for reasons that aren't always easy to understand, these fundamentals slip away from us. Those things, or people, that were intended to be a help to us, actually become a source of fear. But we know there is no need to fear: "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come. Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Jesus Christ our Lord."

