A Survey of Church History:
Apostolic Fathers of Reformation

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Introduction

The study of ecclesiology has fascinated scholars throughout the centuries. Hundreds of volumes and articles have been written on the subject. We find whole volumes dedicated to just one of the great Christian authors of the past. It is, therefore, with humility that we attempt this summarization.

The subject is broad. Oversimplification or too much concentration easily distorts the picture. This is especially true because we are interested in the concept of the church and how it is related to the Christian understanding of salvation. That means we have to include such subjects as a special priesthood, the sacraments, predestination and aspects of soteriology: faith and grace and good works, and sin and redemption from sin, etc.

Furthermore, throughout its history the church has not spoken with one voice to explain what is meant by church, priesthood, sacraments, etc. In addition, there has always been (at least from the time of the so-called heretical and schismatic movements, second and third centuries) more than one church. But who is actually "heretical" and who "schismatic"? The various divisions between East and West, made permanent since the high Middle Ages have their peculiar views on these matters. The fragmentations of the Christian church continue until the end of our period where we not only find differences between the Lutheran, Reformed and Anabaptist traditions, but also variations within each major grouping.

These facts require us to be very reflective in our approach, concentrating

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1 A useful discussion on this subject matter is found in Johannes Schwalte, Großkirche und Sekte. Eine Studie zum Selbstverständnis der Sekte (dissertation, Hamburg, 1962).
on what is traditionally called mainstream Christianity that developed in western Europe. Because of the complexity of the study, we rely on well-known scholars who have researched in these specialized fields of Christian theology.

In order to project the developments that occurred we will present the subject matter chronologically, starting with the Christian writers of postbiblical times and finishing with some writers of the time of the Reformation.2

Christianity is divided into many traditions and churches. What does "church" actually mean to these Christian writers? Are they focusing on "the people of God" by whom they are called into His fellowship? Is the church the "local community of worshipers"? Does the church primarily mean an "organization," a "hierarchy"? Who belongs to the church? What is the meaning of a "holy" church? Does it mean sinless and perfect? What about the sinners within the church? What is the meaning of "catholic"? Does it mean "Roman Catholic"? What is the individual member's relationship to the church? What role does the church play in human salvation? What mission does the church have?

These and other questions, actually quite up-to-date questions, our Christian ancestors raised and answered in their own way. We can compare their answers with Scripture and the historical development and draw our own conclusions for our own questions. If we learn from our spiritual forebears, we do not have anything to fear from the future development of the "church." As God has guided His people, His "church," in times past, so will He guide in the future.

**Apostolic Fathers and Early Apologists**

**Local Church**

The sporadic references in the early writings of the Christians concerning the church should be seen in the historical context of the time. In the second century gnosticism with its speculative and heretical thought flourished. Gnosticism often had separatistic tendencies. In order to guard the church from such falsehood and error Christians had to emphasize the institutional church—at this early time seen as the local congregation. Often this emphasis is expressed in terms of keeping close to the leader of the local church, the bishop.

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2 It is often difficult, especially in the early period of church history, to verify the sources. Not all sources are as reliable as some think. For a few examples of the difficulties see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago and London, 1975), 122.
It is important that we not read into the various categories and expressions of the second century writers meanings from a later time and development. We must understand the terminology they used in their setting. For example, "church" did not mean to them the well-structured, hierarchical organized institution with worldwide competence and authority that we see today. For them "church" meant primarily the "local church" or the fellowship of believers in the various local churches who stood in close contact with each other by means of letters and visits.

The "bishop" or "presbyter"—the terminology is still used interchangeably—has at this early stage no territorial authority for a number of churches. He is the leader of one group of believers. And even though the early Christians recognize and highly respect the leaders of the church—the apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, pastors, presbyters and/or bishops—their main concern was to follow Christ in daily life in loving service and in the witness of the good news of salvation.3

Holy Living

To live a holy life was another concern. The church, the fellowship of believers, sought to be pure, without blemish. One of the earliest documents, "The Didache" (ca. A.D. 100), admonished believers to choose between two ways: the way of life or the way of death.4 The way of life, entered into by believers’ baptism—preferably by immersion in a living stream5—is characterized by abstaining from gross sins which are written out in detail, and include sins of adultery, fornication, witchcraft, abortion, haughtiness, vain boasting, and others.6 Instead, the daily life should reflect meekness, long-suffering, guilelessness, gentleness, and goodness.7

This early document sets the stage for the holy life of the church. One other example may be selected to illustrate this second century emphasis on the holiness of the communion of the saints, the Shepherd of Hermas (more accurately, the Shepherd, authored by Hermas, ca. A.D. 140-134). This writing was one of the most popular and widely used books in the second and third, even fourth centuries. At times we even find it included within collections of the NT books.

3 This is even recognized by Roman Catholic publications, e.g., Patrick M. Dias, Kirche in der Schrift und im 2. Jahrhundert, which is vol. 3, part 3a, in the respected series of M. Schmaus, et al., Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte (Freiburg, Basel, Wien, 1974), 133ff.
4 Didache 1.
5 Didache 7.
6 Didache 2.
7 Didache 3.
The “church” here on earth is compared to a tower which is in the process of being built. But this has nothing to do with a hierarchical structure, but only to illustrate the growth aspect of the church—and maybe the visibility of the church. The church is not only growing; it is also diminishing at the same time, but probably not with the same speed. The diminishing of the church illustrates that we are dealing here with a “pure,” “holy” church.

From twelve mountains (symbolically representing the twelve nations of the earth) stones of various shapes and colors are brought to the tower and used to build it strong and tall. But inspection time comes. “A man of so remarkable a size as to overtop the tower,” that is, Christ, comes “to examine the building carefully.” Many stones are taken out of the building and laid aside. They are not ready for the tower, but are given opportunity to repent and to be fitted into the tower. To some, namely the “apostates and blasphemers against the Lord, and betrayers of the servants of God,” repentance is not open.

In like manner also shall it be with the Church of God, after it has been purified, and has rejected the wicked, and the hypocrites, and the blasphemers, and the wavers, and those who commit wickedness of different kinds. After these have been cast away, the Church of God shall be one body, of one mind, of one understanding, of one faith, of one love. And then the Son of God will be exceeding glad, and shall rejoice over them, because He has received His people pure.

The tower is built on the rock and has only one gate. The Son of God, so the Shepherd explains, is both rock and gate. At the same time the tower is built on water to show the importance of baptism and also the newness of life to which the believers ascend.

The new life is characterized by faith, continence, power, patience, simplicity, innocence, purity, cheerfulness, truth, understanding, harmony, love. The deadness of life carries the characteristics of unbelief, incontinence, disobedience, deceit, sorrow, wickedness, wantonness, anger, falsehood, folly, backbiting, hatred.

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8 We do not want to go into the document’s speculation of the heavenly preexistence of the church. See, Vis. 2.4.1.
9 Hermas, Sim. 9.19.
10 Hermas, Sim. 9.18.
11 Hermas, Sim. 12.
12 Hermas, Vis. 3.19; Sim. 9.16: “They were obliged,” he answered, “to ascend through water in order that they might be made alive; for, unless they laid aside the deadness of their life, they could not in any other way enter into the kingdom of God. . . . The seal then, is the water: they descend into the water dead, and they arise alive.” The imagery used clearly indicates believers’ baptism by immersion.
13 Hermas, Sim. 9.15.
These two samples (the Didache and the Shepherd of Hermas) may be taken as representative of the second and third centuries. They present the church primarily as a holy fellowship of believers, ever striving for pureness of life. We will see that the later church is occupied also with this thought, and we will come back to this theme.

**Church Unity**

The Christian church in the second century experienced a great crisis when gnosticism swept through its congregations. Gnosticism—with its highly speculative theology, allegorical interpretation of Scripture, and many schools of thought—endangered the unity of the church. A very basic “regula fidei” (that is, a confession of faith), the teaching authority of the (local) bishop, and the collection of apostolic books (first steps toward the canon) were the means employed to keep the church together. In this manner leadership could establish some outward guidelines to recognize the empirical church.\(^\text{14}\)

This is not to suggest the false conclusion that the postapostolic church was one in theology and structure. By no means. We still find a plurality of interpretations and opinions on even the most basic subjects, such as the person of Christ. And yet, with the help of the above mentioned means, extensive travel and the exchange of letters and books, a certain unity in development was achieved. As A. V. Harnack noticed, “A Christian, who came from the east to the west or who came from a distant church to another, would not feel himself to be a stranger.”\(^\text{15}\)

As the church moves toward the second century and the battle with heretics becomes more intensive, more and more weight is laid on the local bishops as the guarantee for the truth. Irenaeus (177, bishop in Lyon) clearly expresses the situation in his apologetic writings. Before we read some of his statements, it is necessary to emphasize the apologetic nature of his writings and the Gnostic sects whom he is opposing. He mentions them even by name:

> Each of these heretics claim that this wisdom is what he himself has discovered by himself or rather invented. Thus the truth is really found only with them, at one time with Valentinus, at another with Marcion then with Cerinthus, with Basilides, or with some other opponent of the faith.\(^\text{16}\)

The Gnostics claimed to have access to secret oral tradition, which was to be taken as the source for truth and which enabled them to interpret Scripture.

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16 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haeresis* 3.2.
This was one of the most serious challenges the church encountered, and it did the natural thing in this troublesome situation: It appealed to historical investigation.

The church, according to Irenaeus, could prove that the bishops/presbyters stood in direct historical linkage with the apostles, and that they had preserved the books, the written tradition. And even if the apostles had received some secret revelation, which was not written down, they would have communicated it to the leaders of the congregation and not to anyone whose trustworthiness had not been established.

This means, argued Irenaeus, that within the church we find the truth, because within the church the faith of the apostles and their disciples has been preserved. The common confession of faith creates unity within the whole church.

... and the whole church alike believes in these things, as having one soul and heart, and in unison preaching these beliefs, and teaches and hands them on as having one mouth. For though there are many different languages in the world, still the meaning of the tradition is one and the same. And there are no different beliefs or traditions in the church established in Germany, or in Spain, or among the Celts, or in the East, or in Egypt, or in Libya, or those established in the centre of the earth.

We know from other writings that Irenaeus is presenting more the ideal than the reality. But we can appreciate his appeal to the historical, apostolic writings, the common faith, and the historical linkage of the bishops/presbyters with apostolic historical churches. He wants to fight the "newcomers" whose ideas are built primarily on speculative thought of diverse religious and philosophical origins.

Tertullian (ca. 160/70–215/20), writing from North Africa, confronted the same heresies as Irenaeus. He uses this same type of argumentation and very similar expressions to refute those who were destroying the unity of the church.

There is, of course, a turning point in Tertullian’s life when he became a Montanist, reacting to the developing episcopacy structure and the ever-widening division between the priesthood and the laity. At first sight, this kind

17 Ibid., 3.3
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 See Tertullian in De Praescriptione Haereticorum, 20, 21, 32, 36, 41; Adversus Marcionam, 4.5; De virginibus Venerandis 1, 2; and others.
22 Tertullian, De exhort. cast. 7; de monog. 12.
of reaction may be valued as positive, a desire to bring the church back to the
time of the apostles when spiritually-gifted persons without an "office" in the
church were highly respected. But with Tertullian, as with the latter part of the
Montanist movement, the church is so closely identified with the Holy Spirit
that only the pure can be part of the church.23

This kind of theology is already reflected in Tertullian's writing "On
Baptism," in which he advocates the postponement of "believers baptism" as
long as possible, at least until the candidate can see and understand the
consequences of baptism.24 This idea is even more clearly expressed in his
writing "On Repentance":

> These poisons of his [i.e., the devil's], therefore, God foresaw, and
> although the gate of forgiveness has been shut and fastened with the bar of
> baptism, He has permitted some means of access. In the vestibule He has
> stationed the second repentance to open to such as knock: but now once for
> all, because now for the second time; but never more, because the last time
> had been in vain.25

The Montanist movement, the first of three major ecclesiological reaction
movements during the postapostolic period, was eventually condemned by the
main church as a heretical sect, although at first tolerated as an "orthodox"
"reformation movement." The Montanists tried to go back to apostolic church
order. This included the belief, according to Tertullian, that where three
believers gathered, there existed the church, and there one could baptize and
celebrate the Eucharist, even if no bishop were present.26 He argued for binding
the anointing of the Spirit to the person who received the gift and not to the
office held (that is, of the bishop). And believers were still to recognize and
appreciate the gift of prophecy.27

**Summary**

By and large, we see during the second century a church developing which
primarily centered on the bishop/presbyter, as its shepherd. Some church
historians believe that an overemphasis was laid on obedience to the bishop
and that the idea of the "Catholic Church" was laid down in principle already

23 Tertullian, *de pud.* 19, 21; cf. Pierre-Thomas Cameld, *Die Lehre von der Kirche.* Väterzeit bis ausschlies:
slich Augustinus, in: M. Schmaus et al. *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte,* vol. 3, pt. 3b (Freiburg,
24 Tertullian, *De bapt.* 18.
25 *De poen.* 7, *On Repentance,* is dated to 203. Later, when he became a Montanist, Tertullian did not even
allow for a second repentance.
26 Schwital presents a positive evaluation of the Montanist movement, 48-51.
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at this time. But otherwise we have to view the church of the second century as a fellowship of believers who were encouraged by their leaders to lead holy lives. They were also to love their non-Christian neighbors so that by example and love they would be encouraged to follow "the way."

Development of Episcopacy

Cyprian’s Concerns

Cyprian (d. 258), bishop of Carthage, used Tertullian’s earlier writings and by so doing continued certain developments, pertaining especially to the priesthood and the sacraments. But he “has the distinction of being the first to develop the doctrine of the Episcopalian Church.”28 This concept we will investigate a little further.

Cyprian had two concerns. On the one hand (like his predecessors) he was concerned about the unity of the church as he now faced the development of a new ecclesiastical schism, namely, Novatianism. On the other hand he is concerned about the “holiness” of the church. The response which he gives to the second concern is closely related and actually evolves out of the response he gives to his first concern.

Symbols of the Church

Cyprian uses many symbols to describe the church. The church is like a “harbor” where the believer finds security from the storm. Even more common is the well-known figure of the “house” into which believers enter. He often refers to the harlot Rahab who was ordered to gather her relatives and herself into a certain house in order to be saved. He then emphasizes the aspect of being “within” and “without” the house.

Similarly he employs the figure of Noah’s ark: To be within the ark was to be saved. The same symbol is used when he wants to emphasize that baptism can only be performed within the church. Noah and his family could only be saved from the water of the Flood while inside the ark. A little later we will return to the ascertain that there is only one baptism, performed by the one church, and only by those who are within the one church.

Cyprian also likens the church to a mother. The fertility of the mother, in spite of her virginity (a contradiction of figures), is praised. We are born out of her bosom, fed with her milk and quickened with her spirit. Furthermore,

the church is likened to the "bride of Christ," without spot and wrinkle. And again, the church is like a "body." The believers are the single members of the body, who are incorporated into it.29

Clergy and Laity

In all these figures, if we could present them in more detail, we would recognize the distinction being made between the persons who are the church and those who belong to the church. Cyprian distinguishes more sharply than anyone before him between the clergy and the people. The bishop is the embodiment of the church. Those who want to belong to the church have to belong to the bishop.

The church is made up of the people united to their priest, the flock cleaving to its shepherd. Hence you should know that the bishop is in the church, and the church in the bishop, and that if anyone is not with the bishop he is not in the church; ...30

Cyprian goes even further. He denies that there is actual faith outside of the one church. In his fight with the Novatians he expressly denies the fatherhood of God to believers who belong to a movement with an otherwise "orthodox" confession, but who differ in the practice of admitting the "lapsed" back into the church. Difference in church discipline and the consequent separation from the church was enough for Cyprian to pronounce the following statement:

Whoever stands aloof from the church and is joined to an adulterous [i.e., the Novatian schism] is cut off from the promises given to the church; and he that leaves the church of Christ attains not to Christ's rewards. He is an alien, an enemy. He cannot have God for his father who has not the church for his mother. If any one was able to escape outside of Noah's ark, then he also escapes who is outside the doors of the church31

And since this was not possible, there is no salvation outside the church.
Cyprian's starting point is the idea of the one church and the one episcopate which he believed Christ had ordained.32 The main function of the bishop, with the help of the presbyters and deacons, is to administer the sacraments and church discipline. These sacraments and also the discipline

29 These figures are discussed in more detail by Walter Simonis, Ecclesia visibilis et invisibilis. Untersuchungen zur Ekklesiologie und Sakramentslehre in der afrikanischen Tradition von Cyprian bis Augustinus (Frankfurt/M, 1970), Sff.
30 Cyprian, Ep. 66.7.
31 Cyprian, De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate, 4-7.
32 Cyprian, Ep. 33.1.
can only be administered by the one episcopate.

Sacraments, for example, baptism, offered outside of the church are invalid. Therefore, the church "rebaptizes" those who have been baptized by the so-called heretics. Of course, Cyprian points out that they do not really "rebaptize," but only baptize, since he does not recognize any baptism outside the one church. Cyprian sent his brother Jubaianus a letter containing the following statement:

And now we have met again, seventy-one bishops of the province of Africa and Numidia, and we have confirmed our previous decision, laying it down that there is one baptism, that of the Catholic church, and that in consequence we do not "rebaptize," but baptize all those who, coming as they do from adulterous and unhallowed water, have to be washed and sanctified by the true water of salvation.

Through the second severe ecclesiastical controversy, the Novatian schism, we find in the writings of Cyprian a (Catholic) church developing. It is characterized by a dominant episcopal system in connection with a priesthood that administered the soul-saving sacraments and church discipline upon which the people totally depended for their salvation.

Augustine's Ecclesiology

Augustine's (354-430) thoughts on ecclesiology developed in part as a result of controversial disputes with the Donatists. In order to understand Augustine's ideas of the church, we will briefly summarize the main thoughts on the church as we find them presented in the Donatist church.

Donatism

The Donatist controversy, like the Novatian schism, was a by-product of severe persecution, this time under emperor Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century. Under the pressure many Christians and also a number of bishops handed over to the Roman officials sacred writings of the church or copies of the Holy Scriptures. These persons were regarded (by those who stood firm) as "traditores," that is, traitors. Traitors were no longer members

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33 Cyprian, Ep. 69.7; 71.1.
34 Cyprian, Ep. 73.1. On this point Cyprian differs with the bishop of Rome, Stephen, and others, who accepted the baptism of those whom they regarded as heretics, as long as it was performed in the name of the triune God. The most important part of baptism was water and Christ's appointment of it, irrespective of the state of those who administered the baptism. See for example Bengt Hägglund, Teologins Historia, En Dogmenhistorisk översikt (Lund, 1971), 91, This later became the official understanding of the Roman Catholic Church.
of the church. This was a clear North African understanding, going back to Cyprian and Tertullian.35

After a vacancy in the bishopric of Carthage, a certain Caecilian, the deacon of the former bishop Mensurinus (d. 311) was elected bishop in 312 in spite of opposition from other bishops. The bishops objected because Caecilian belonged to Mensurinus’ party which had opposed the overwhelming exaltation of martyrdom during the above mentioned persecution. But what was even worse, his consecration was performed before the Numidian bishops arrived and involved bishop Felix of Abtungi who was accused of being a “traitor.”

As soon as the Numidians arrived, Caecilian was replaced and Majorinus took the office until his death in 313, at which time Donatus took the post. For 40 years Donatus was leader and organizer of this schismatic movement. The rehabilitation of Caecilian by two councils (Rome 313; Arles 314) did not change the matter, except that the Donatists could now see that the Roman Church and many others sided with the “traitors.” By far the majority of Christians in the North African region stood behind Donatus.

The Donatists, basing their church idea on Cyprian and Tertullian, wanted to create a “holy” church. “Holiness” was one of the central marks of Donatist ecclesiology. This holiness is required of the members, but especially of the bishop. A bishop who turns traitor cannot be the church, and the people who hold to such a bishop, cannot belong to the church.

Since the “Catholic” Church, that is, the church of Rome and many other places, do not dissociate themselves from the traitors, or the traitors from them, they cannot be the church of God. Therefore, people baptized outside of the Donatist fraction, the true church, have to be “rebaptized.” Of course, according to Donatist understanding, this was not rebaptism, but the first baptism. Since baptism is a sacrament of the church, and the only true church are the Donatists, outside of Donatism there was no church and, therefore, no valid baptism.

When in controversy with the “Catholics,” they would be asked if Jesus’ parable of the weeds among the wheat taught that the good and the evil would exist side by side until the final judgment. The Donists would reply that the field was not the church, where the weeds and wheat coexisted, but the world. Within the church were only the “holy” ones.

The Donatists, like the rest of the church, distinguished between venial sins and deadly sins. Those who commit deadly sins after baptism had to be

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35 Sacraments received by persons who committed deadly sins (to betray was a deadly sin) were invalid, according to Tertullian and Cyprian. See K. Heussi, Kompendium der Kirchengeschichte, 11th ed. (Berlin, 1958), 104.
separated from the church. There are only two groups of people: the “corpus Christi,” identical with the empirical church, and the “corpus diaboli,” that is, the world.36

Where then is the true church according to Donatism? The true, holy, and only church exists where a holy priesthood (the bishops with the presbyters and deacons) administers the sacraments in order to make the followers holy. The Donatist schism lasted for two centuries during which time it fought against Roman centralism. It was destroyed by the Arian Vandals, and a remnant which survived until the seventh century was swept away by the Saracens.

Augustine’s Views on the Church

With this background we return to Augustine. In the Augustinian view the church bears the following signs: love (caritas), catholicity, and apostolicity. The most eminent fruits, also signs, are unity, peace, and holiness. With these several signs Augustine had powerful weapons to fight the Donatists. Donatism emphasized primarily “holiness.” But what about the other signs? The church according to Augustine must always be a worldwide church (catholicity) with roots going back to the apostles themselves (apostolicity).37

Augustine distinguishes three categories of professed Christians which can be found in the visible church.

1. Of this some live spiritual lives and follow the supreme path of love; if anyone is overtaken of a fault, they instruct him in a spirit of gentleness and look to themselves lest they also be tempted.38

2. Then there are some who are still living their lives at the carnal or natural level. They vigorously pursue their own advancement. . . . Things which are obviously corrupt they avoid of their fear of God. . . . They give careful study to the rule of faith and hold firmly to it.39

3. Then there are yet others in that number who are still living evil lives, and as yet still belong to heretical bodies or even to gentle superstitions. But in their case too, “God knows those who are his.” For in this ineffable foreknowledge of God, there are many who seem to be outside who are really inside, and many who seem to be inside who are really outside.40

Bengt Hägglund in his “History of Theology” illustrates these three groups in the following way:

36 For a more detailed discussion of the Donatist schism, with reference to the primary sources, see Walter Simonis, Ecclesia Visibilis et invisibilis (Frankfurt, 1970), 23ff.
37 Augustin, Serm. 268,2; esp. 61,2; esp, 93.23.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
A. The outward saving institution: Christianity.
B. The communion of the saints: the bride of Christ, the invisible fellowship of love.
C. The predestined.41

Augustine can make these distinctions because of the new-platonic dualism which he retained after becoming a Christian. This dualism appears in his writings and becomes a kind of problem solver for him. It is variously expressed by terms such as: spirit-letter, inward-outward, invisible-visible, etc.

Ultimately, he will say that only God knows His church. It consists of those who are predestined by Him. This is the invisible church, the church of the elect, the church as such. Since man does not know who is predestined and who is not, and since man does not have any absolute sign of predestination, he has to belong to the church because there he finds the means of salvation.

It is only in the church that the believer has access to the sacraments, especially baptism and the eucharist, the means of grace that lead people to a holy life. Although the sacraments are only effective within the Catholic Church, their outer signs can also be found outside of the church, for example, with the Donatists. Therefore people need not be rebaptized, who have been baptized by the Donatists. The outward sign, they have already received. But the grace which is conveyed with the sign, can only be received from the one Catholic Church, which has received the Holy Spirit.

Augustine acknowledges that there may even be unsanctified priests within the external church, but this does not affect the efficacy of the sacraments. The real acting person is Christ Himself, the priest is only the minister. In Donatism the sacraments were much more bound to the church and the holy priesthood.42

Augustine’s greatest apologetic work, “De civitate Dei” (The city of God), was written to answer the pagan accusation that the Christians were the cause for all the civil catastrophes. In this work we also find his basic ecclesiological thoughts. The city of God should not on the one hand be identified with the outward church. As observed above, only the invisible church, the hidden church, the communion of the saints, belong to her, and yet Augustine does not separate this invisible church idea from the outward, hierarchical church. He may distinguish between them, but he never separates these two concepts.

42 For a more detailed discussion on Augustine’s ecclesiology with reference to his primary sources, see Walter Simoni, 75ff.; Yves M. J. Congar, Die Lehre von der Kirche von Augustinus bis zum abendländischen Schisma, in M. Schmaus, et al., Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte, vol. 3, 3c (Freiburg, 1971).
Similarly, the "Civitas terrena" (the city of this world) should not be identified with the state, but rather with the evil and godless men, that is, the old heathen states. The ideal would be to have a Christian state, which would be built on principles of the "city of God." Such a state is actually necessary for the sake of outward order and should ultimately exist for the sake of the "city of God." Therefore, in principle, the church stands above the state.

With this idea of the superiority of the "city of God" over the worldly state, we have arrived at an ecclesiology which would have, because it was misunderstood, great significance for the continuous struggle between the church and state during the Middle Ages.

When Augustine spoke of the church's superiority, he did not mean the visible hierarchical church with all its ecclesiastical offices. Rather he spoke about the church's spiritual superiority; she was superior because of her very nature. Her principles are above the principles of this world. As we will see, this misunderstood Augustinian principle lies at the root of the popes' later claim that they are above all worldly power.

One other aspect from Augustine's De civitate Dei should be mentioned, because of his merger of ecclesiology with eschatology. Augustine divides world history into six periods, in which the conflict between "the city of God" and "the city of the world" exists. The first period lasted from Creation to the Flood; the second, from the Flood to the confusion of languages; the third, from Abraham to David; the fourth, from David to the end of the exile; the fifth, until Christ; the sixth, from Christ to His return, at which time the final separation of the good and the evil, of the weeds and the wheat, takes place.

The millennium of Revelation 20 which was usually considered as belonging to the eschaton (the end) is identified by Augustine with the sixth period. The sixth period embraced the rule of the church, that is, the kingdom of God here on earth. Thus the judging mentioned in Revelation 20:4 is not done by the saints after the return of Christ, but is executed by the rulers of the church in this Christian Era.43

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43 See various sections in De Civitate Dei, or F. Loofs, 330ff.; B. Hägglund, 111ff. Before we leave this era of the church, we need to mention one aspect of ecclesiology, namely, the communion of the saints, which is often neglected in summarized presentations. Space does not allow detail, but it is important to know that the "communion of the saints" is actually much broader than this chapter may imply. The whole angelic world and all the believers from OT times to the present, all who died in faith, especially the martyrs are included. Since the Platonic understanding of the natural immortal soul quickly spread within the church, Christians came to believe that the soul of martyrs had direct access to heaven and that their lives provided satisfaction for the church, for the living and for the deceased. Toward the end of the second century we find the first references to prayers for the dead. So the "church," that is, the communion of the saints, included all good angels, who also direct and guide the lives of the living, the believers of OT times, the martyrs, the dead in Christ and of course
At this point we leave the early period and briefly turn our attention to the Middle Ages.

The Roman Catholic Church  
(Middle Ages)

In a short chapter we cannot present the whole development of the Papacy. Only a few highlights will be given to mark the basic ecclesiological preoccupation during this period.

The foundation for the hierarchical system that developed in Rome was laid in the previous centuries. Various historical and cultural reasons can be given that favored the western church's development into the Roman Catholic Papacy.

For example, Rome was the capital of the empire. Since it was the largest city, it probably had the largest number of Christians. Many early writers attest that Peter and Paul were there and even experienced martyrdom there. Thus, Rome was considered the only "apostolic see" in the west. When the emperor moved to Constantinople ("new Rome") in 330, the bishop of Rome was the most important person in the city. The Christian church went through a number of theological controversies in this era. It seems that Rome mostly sided with the "orthodox" party or that party which at least won in the theological battle. Such developments tended to elevate the authority of the bishop of Rome.

To this should be added the various claims of the Roman bishops themselves—from Victor to Gregory the Great. A number of them claim the primacy over other bishops, but otherwise do not add anything new to the ecclesiological structure as such. This primacy is most strongly expressed by Damasus (366-84).44

Petrine Doctrine

Other Roman bishops like Siricius (384-99) and Innocent I (402-17) "play" with the Petrine idea of the church, but it was Leo the Great (440-461) who established and rounded off the Petrine doctrine. "It was for St. Leo—A Roman of the Romans—to establish the primacy of the Roman see and to provide it with a theory, or dogmatic basis, which has been held with little modification until embodied in the Vatican definition of 1870."45 What is this new "dogmatic basis"? What is meant by the "Petrine theory"?

Petrine Doctrine

Peter's connection is no longer only a question of respect for Rome being founded by a chief apostle. Nor is it only a question of the right tradition handed down through succession from Peter through the Roman bishops, as Irenaeus and Tertullian describe it in order to fight the Gnostics. Now, it is a question of the right to rule over the rest of the church, because Peter, in some mystical way, is still present in the Roman bishops. Note pope Leo's words:

The divine condescension, has made this an honourable day for me. It has raised my humility to the highest rank. The fostering condescension, and true love of the most blessed apostle Peter is, I feel sure, not absent from this congregation (sc. of bishops). He welcomes your respect for the Lord's own institution, and commends the well-ordered love of the whole Church which ever finds Peter in Peter's see; and from affection for so great a shepherd grows not lukewarm even over so inferior a successor as myself. So entreat the good God that He will render me, whom He has willed to stand at the helm of the Church, sufficient for so great a task.46

Leo develops another important aspect of the Petrine doctrine. Peter is the mediator of the grace of Christ to his fellow disciples. This mediatorial office his successors have received. All bishops receive Christ's special grace of authority from Peter's successors. All other bishops are actually extensions of the bishop of Rome:

The rights of that authority passed over, indeed, to the other apostles as well, and the ordinance of this decree reached all the princes of the Church; but not in vain was that entrusted to one which was promised to all. To Peter was this unique grant made, that the person of Peter should be preferred to the rulers of all the churches. The privilege of Peter therefore still remains... 47

And from Sermon V we quote:

It is true, that all the bishops taken singly preside each with his proper solicitude over his own flock, and know that they will have to give an account for the sheep committed to them. To us, however, is committed the common care of all: and no single bishop's administration is other than a part of our own task.48

In his letter to the bishops of the province of Vienne (445) against Hilary of Arles, Leo asserted, "Anyone who dares to secede from Peter's solid rock may understand that he has no part or lot in the divine mystery."49

45 Kidd, 117.
46 Leo the Great, Sermon 2; cf. from Kidd, 117-18.
47 Leo the Great, Sermon 4; cf. from Kidd, 119-20.
48 Leo the Great, Sermon 5
49 Cf, from Kidd, 120.
In another letter (445) to Anastasius, bishop of Thessalonica, Leo clearly expresses hierarchical thoughts, and points out the distinction of power. Distinction within the various provinces and major cities, which should have responsibility over their peers, until all power and responsibility and "the cure of the universal church should converge toward Peter's seat, and nothing anywhere should be separate from its head."50

**Gregory I (540-604)**

With this background we can precede to Gregory the Great, classified by some as the first pope of the early Middle Ages. Gregory emphasizes again and again the universality of the church, which include all from Abel to the final elect, including the good angels. He assumes universal responsibility and power, although he does not use the title of "universal bishop."

Another concept important for Gregory's ecclesiology is the "holy church of the elect." The elect are those who are worthy of bearing the name "Christian"; their names are written in the books of heaven, and their lives on earth already demonstrate their election through the signs of love and humility.51

Gregory I is called "the actual founder of the worldly power of the papacy in Italy."52 This is important for the later development of the papacy and its actual claim of civil power, a claim which is still asserted today in the form of the city-state, the Vatican state. This position of power rested on the enormous (enlarged under Gregory) properties which the church inherited. These became the basis for the later church-state.

Here then, we find the beginning of a new concept of the church, namely, a union of church and state. Such a union was the ideal, according to many popes' ideas during the Middle Ages. If this were not possible, then the church should at least be above the state.

Gregory I also developed an ideal description of the princes and kings and civil powers and their relation to the church. All kingly power should stand in the service of the church. And where the church is not powerful enough to persuade persons to render religious obedience, the kingly power should offer its service to the church to compel compliance by force.53 Unfortunately the

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50 Cf. from Kidd, 120. The former development is also recognized by Catholic scholars; see e.g., Yves M.-J. Congar, *Die Lehre von der Kirche von Augustinus bis zum abendländischen Schisma 3* in M. Schnauss, et al., *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Freiburg, Basel, Wein, 1970), 11ff.
51 Congar, 16ff.
53 Congar, 18.
Roman church of the Middle Ages often practiced this idea expressed by Gregory I.

Eleventh Century Developments

Humbert von Moyеннouțier, a personal adviser of Leo IX, reveals in his writings (mid-eleventh century) his preoccupation with the Roman Church as the seat of Peter. Her position among the other churches he describes with words like head, mother, fountain, foundation. And we can imagine what he wants to express with these nouns. All indicate the utter supremacy of the Roman Church and the utter dependency of her members.

This absolute dependency of the members on the church is also expressed in a strong distinction between the laity and the clergy. It seems as if he wishes to express not only a distinction but also a contrast. On the one hand we have the world of the laity, who devote themselves to the secular life. And then we have the world of the clergy, who are devoted to the life of the church. Congar rightly evaluates his thoughts, when he says that “he [Humbert] departs from the concept of the Church as the people of God, and turns to an ecclesiology in the sense of a clerical-hierarchical organism.”

During this century (1054) the eastern and western segments of Catholicism separated. The Eastern church could not accept the claims of Rome to be the head, the mother, the teacher, etc., of all Christendom. They ultimately recognize only one head over their church, Jesus Christ.

The Western church for a number of centuries was preoccupied with judicial structures within the church organization by which the clerical hierarchy could function. We find more centralization of power with the introduction of the Curia, papal administration, the term being taken over from the civil administration. The interest was not in collegial, horizontal sharing of power with other bishops or even with the patriarchs of the East. The interest was in gathering the lines of power into a vertical structure, with all authority resting in its papal head. Besides this, of course, we still find the sacramental church in which the priests did their daily work.

Gregory VII (Hildebrand) came to the papal “throne” in 1073. I use the word “throne” to indicate his absolutist ideas of the church. This pope expressed his ideas in clear judicial-monarchical terms: Everyone was subordinated to the pope.

Gregory VII took away from the civil powers the right to invest, that is,

54 Congar.
55 See Congar, 60-61.
install bishops in their region. In other words, all lay-investiture was forbidden. Disobedience to the pope is one of the worst sins, he argued, quoting 1 Samuel 15:23. Matthew 16:19 is now used to provide a textual foundation for an institution which has absolute powers to loose and to bind. Congar summarizes Gregory's thoughts by saying, "He is finally the only lawgiver, source and norm of all justice the universal highest judge, who cannot be judged by anyone."56

Since Gregory VII was one of the first so-called reform popes, we should not think that he had merely ambitions for worldly power. His expressions should be seen in the context of his time in which we find a constant struggle between worldly (that is, Henry IV) and papal powers. When Gregory expects absolute obedience, he feels that his reform is dependent on this concept, so that the church and her members can serve God and man in the right way. He feels that this service can function best in strong centralized way, where the pope is ruling supremely over the whole church as one large universal diocese.

Although bishops and metropolitans take part in Gregory's judicial powers, they do not have all the powers. Gregory VII even limited the powers of the bishops by founding the institution of the legates, the personal ambassadors of the pope. The legate might not be consecrated as bishop, yet he was given greater powers than the bishops and metropolitans. "The judicial is in the process of winning over the sacramental."57

Protests and Early Reformers

Unfortunately, we do not have space to do more than mention the protests which began to surface more and more from theologians and theological writers against these kinds of ideas. Various monastic orders had their special views of the church and often tried to reform it. Early Reformation movements, like the Waldensians, the Wyclifites, and the Hussites developed with their special criticism of the hierarchical, priestly ecclesiology that they saw oppressing the people.

However, it will be necessary to trace two developments in the papal system to their ultimate conclusions: the relationship of church and secular powers and the further development of priestly "spiritual" power.

The Two Swords

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the "religious genius of the twelfth

56 Cf. from Congar, 55. Description of Gregory's thoughts, Congar, 61ff.
57 Congar, 64.
century, adviser of popes and princes, the uncrowned ruler of Europe," developed the idea of the two swords, that is, the spiritual "sword" and the temporal sword. Both swords belong to the church, but the church hands over the sword of the soldier to the civil ruler, who then uses it on command of the church. Thus, the civil power is to defend the church's interests, for example, fight heretics and suppress uprisings. With this concept the theological foundation is laid for the crusades and the later Inquisition.

Parallel with this development, we find the popes in the high Middle Ages crowning themselves with various descriptions and titles, each one expressing more authority and power than the other: for example, *apostolicus*, *universalis*, *plentitudo potestatis*, *vicarius Christi*.60

Formerly a pope used the title "successor Petri." He never used "vicarius Petri," which would have been more appropriate, according to the idea of the primacy of the Roman bishop. But now the popes use "Petri successor, vicarius Christi." With the title "vicarius Christi" we find Innocent III (1198-1216) expressing the idea that the pope stands above the church, he is the head of the church and of all Christian people (he tries to distinguish between the two groups), yes he is even a kind of mediator who stands between God and men.61

These thoughts about the hierarchical structure led also to speculations about the infallibility of the teaching authority of the church. Ultimately they prompted the monarchical idea of the papacy expressed clearly in the well-known bull "Unam sanctam" (1302) by Boniface VIII (1294-1303).

We are obliged by the faith to believe and hold—and we do firmly believe and sincerely confess—that there is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, and that outside this Church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins. . . . In which Church there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." At the time of the flood there was one ark of Noah, symbolizing the one Church; this was completed in one cubit and had one, namely Noah, as helmsman and captain; outside which all things on earth, we read, were destroyed. . . . Of this one and only Church there is one body and one head—not two heads, like a monster—namely Christ, and Christ's vicar is Peter, and Peter's successor, for the Lord said to Peter himself, "Feed My sheep." "My sheep" he said in general, not these or those sheep; wherefore He is understood to have committed them all to him. Therefore, if the Greeks or others say that they were not committed to Peter and his successors, they necessarily confess that they are not of Christ's sheep, for the Lord

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58 Heussi, 207.
59 Congar, 89ff.
60 Ibid., 118-19.
61 Ibid., 125.
62 Ibid., 144, 159, 161.
says in John, "There is one fold and one shepherd."

And we learn from the words of the Gospel that in this Church and in her power are two swords, the spiritual and the temporal. For when the apostles said, "Behold, here" (that is, in the Church, since it was the apostles who spoke) "are two swords"—the Lord did not reply, "It is too much," but "It is enough," Truly he who denies that the temporal sword is in the power of Peter, misunderstands the words of the Lord, "Put up thy sword into the sheath." Both are in the power of the Church, the spiritual sword and the material. But the latter is to be used for the Church, the former by her; the former by the priest, the latter by the kings and captains but at the will and by the permission of the priest. The one sword, then, should be under the other, and temporal authority subject to spiritual, for when the apostle says "there is no power but of God, and the powers that be are ordained of God" they would not be so ordained were not one sword made subject to the other.

Thus, concerning the Church and her power, is the prophecy of Jeremiah fulfilled, "See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms," etc. If, therefore, the earthly power ere it shall be judged by God, not by man; for the testimony of the apostle is "The spiritual man judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no-man." For this authority, although given to a man and exercised by a man, is not human, but rather divine, given at God's mouth to Peter and established on the rock for him and his successors in him whom he confessed, the Lord saying to Peter himself, "Whatsoever thou shalt bind," etc. Whoever therefore resists this power thus ordained of God, resists the ordinance of God. . . Furthermore we declare, state, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subjects to the Roman pontiff.63

It is the irony of church history, that here, where the church expresses its highest ambition, it experiences its greatest fall. Boniface VIII was taken captive by order of the French king, Philipp IV, in 1303 but died shortly thereafter. The papacy entered its so-called "Babylonian captivity" (1303–1377). Removed from Rome, the papacy functioned from Avignon, being directly dependent upon France.

Development of Priestly Powers

The development of absolute priestly power was an important part of the ecclesiological development during this period. The sacrament of the Eucharist, the binding and loosing sacrament of confession or penitence, and the sacrament of ordination or holy orders link to this subject. All of which demonstrate the total and utter dependence of the "laity" on the clergy and the

vast gulf which existed between these two groups in the church.

Very early we find penitential books (some survive from the sixth century) which describe in detail what a person should do if he sinned. We speak not only about the so-called deadly sins, but also of minor sins, and even secret sins. These books on penitence develop into the institution of penitence. The later form of penitence included several steps, for example, "Contritio cordis" (the contrition of the heart), "confessio oris" (the oral confession), "satisfactio operis" (the satisfactory works). The early practice of public reconciliation with the church was soon changed into the absolution by the priest as the final step.64

We know from church history that this penitential system, designated to discipline the members and encourage holy living, degenerated during the latter part of the Middle Ages. The sale of indulgences permitted an amount of money to satisfy the church's demand in order to receive forgiveness.

The power of loosing and binding goes hand in hand with the sacramental understanding of the Eucharist and the priestly power to consecrate the elements. In connection with baptism a new term come to be used, developed by Petrus Lombardus (d. 1169), but already found in Augustine's writings. It is the word "character," which was understood as the "invisible and remaining sign" of God's grace received through the sacraments, especially of baptism and holy orders.

This term "character" became for the scholastics a fundamental ecclesiological principle. They had now a theological basis to distinguish between believers and unbelievers and especially a means for distinguishing between laity and clergy. This character was "indelebilis," that is, it could not be wiped out. For example, the priest's life and relation to the church, even if sinful, could not erase this imprint of his ordination. Congar concludes that this step "means the end of the Augustinian ecclesiology of the 'ecclesia.' "65 This "character indelebilis" gives the priest also the power to consecrate the elements of the eucharist, so they become changed into the real body and blood of Christ. This power over the "true body of Christ" is related to the true power over the "mystical body of Christ," that is, over the church.

We can easily see from this development how necessary reform was needed. The sporadic reform tendencies mentioned above were not enough. The reform councils of the fifteenth century were not successful. The Reformation was needed, a return to the authority of the Scriptures.

64 See Hägglund's discussion on penitence, 136ff.
65 Congar, 106.
Reformation Concept of the Church

In this section we will briefly touch on two main personalities of the Reformation: Luther and Calvin.

Basis for Luther's View

An author is tempted to explain Luther's ecclesiology exclusively in terms of his conflict with the Roman Church. A great Luther scholar, Karl Holl, tries to understand Luther's view of the church from his main concept of the Reformation as it develops. However, long before he came to clash with the church, Luther's ideas, or at least the basic principles for his ideas, were laid down.

In his commentary on the Psalms we find the first theological platform for his ecclesiology. God's righteousness, Luther discovered, speaks about a relationship with God and Christ and not about an absolute state on the moral plan, which God requires from the individual in order to save him/her. In other words, Luther's engagement with the Word, and the rediscovered gospel, and the central truth of justification by grace alone through faith are the bases for his understanding of the church.66

Luther's Negative Views of the Medieval Church

With this background we will, with the help of Emanuel Hirsch,67 summarize Luther's ecclesiology. First we note his negative views of the priestly, hierarchical church of medieval Rome.

1. It is necessary to distinguish between the true church or spiritual, inner Christendom and the outward church or the physical, outer Christendom.68

2. Even though the church excommunicates a believer from the sacramental fellowship of the outward church, she cannot rob a believer of the spiritual inner fellowship of Christ.69

3. The papacy was not founded by Christ.70

4. No churchly institution has the right, with laws and regulations, to bind the conscience which is made free by Christ.71

66 See a full discussion by Karl Holl, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte 1 (Luther, Tübingen, 1927): 287-325.
69 Luther, Sermo de virtute ex communicationis, WA 1, 638ff.; Id., Sermon von dem Bann, 1520, WA 6, 63ff. (cf. Hirsch, 195).
5. There is no distinction between priests and laity.72

6. Confession must be voluntary. To listen to a confession and to absolve is the right of every Christian.73

Although the church is primarily an invisible, inner reality, it should not be thought of as only a Platonic idea. We do have some outward signs of the church and even a church order. In actual life, the “inner” and “outer” church should not be separated. They belong together.74

The most prominent signs of the hidden, true church are the preaching of the gospel, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper.75 Second, all Christians have the authority to preach the Word, but for the sake of order, the fellowship of believers chooses people to administer the public preaching service. According to Luther every baptized person is already ordained to be “priest, bishop and pope,” but not all should function as such, otherwise there would be chaos.76

With this line of argument Luther denies the Roman idea of the “charactes indelebilis,” the sacrament of ordination that puts the priesthood on a higher level and creates a gulf between priests and lay people. From this evolved the great reformation principle of the “priesthood of all believers,” a fundamental mark of the church in Protestantism. Unfortunately many Protestant churches developed an organizational structure in which the “laity” scarcely played a significant role.

Another aspect of Luther’s church idea was the close linkage between the church and the state. The church needs order, and the civil powers could be asked to implement this church order. In order to prevent divisions and even uprisings among the subjects, the civil prince has the responsibility to work for peace and order also within the church.77

This medieval view presupposes, of course, that the civil powers are Christians themselves. Luther takes this for granted, and he also takes for granted that everyone (by infant baptism) belongs to the church. The idea of the “Volkskirche” (one church for all members of society) is one of the cornerstones of the Lutheran Reformation and reflects a typical ecclesiology for the great reformers. This idea can be seen most clearly in the “Lan-

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72 Luther, De instituendis ecclesiae ministris, WA 7, 759ff. (cf. Hirsch, 199).
74 Hägglund, 222-23. See Ernst Rietach, Das Problem der unsichtbar—sichtbaren Kirche bei Luther: Darstellung und Lösungsvorschlag (Leipzig, 1932), for detailed discussion on the “visible—invisible” nature of the church.
76 Luther, An den christlichen Adel, 1520, WA 6, 408; Von der Winkelmese und Pfaffenweihe, 1533, WA 38, 236-37; and many other places (cf. Hirsch, 203-4).
deskirchen” in Germany and the “state-churches” of the Lutheran Nordic countries.

Luther’s Views on the True Church

We wish to close our review of Lutheran ecclesiology with a positive note which Catholic scholar, Albert Brandenburg, derives by analyzing theses 19 and 20 of the Heidelberg disputation of 1518. These theses speak about the hiddenness of God in nature and His true revelation in the sufferings of Christ on the cross. From Luther’s “theologia crucis,” Brandenburg develops Luther’s ecclesiology of the “ecclesia crucis,” the church under the cross in humble pilgrimage and loving service to mankind.78

With this thought we come back to Karl Holl who bases Luther’s ecclesiology on the core of Reformation theology, namely the justification of man. This concept, of course, is identical with the “theology of the cross.” This means that the sacramental, mediatorial priesthood—organized into Rome’s powerful, all-dominant hierarchy of the Middle Ages—is rejected in favor of another concept of the church in which every believer is his/her own priest in relation with God. The believer does not need any mediator except Christ. The Christian church is “the congregation of all believers, among whom the gospel is preached in its purity, and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel,” quoting a central sentence of the Augsburg Confession.79

In conclusion we list the seven signs of the visible church, God’s people here on earth, which Luther summarized in a polemical treatise, written toward the end of his life.80

80 Luther, Von den Konzilis und Kirchen, 1539, WA 50, 628ff.
1. You can recognize the "Christian holy people" where the holy Word of God is proclaimed. Even though this word is not in all places proclaimed in its purity, God can cleanse it even by fire. "Everything is sanctified by the Word and by prayer."

Where you hear the Word and see it proclaimed, believed, confessed, and where one lives according to it, there you do not need to have any doubt, that there in surety there must be the true 'Ecclesia sancta Catholica,' a true Christian holy people, even though there are only few.81

2. You can recognize "the people of God or the Christian holy people on the holy sacrament of baptism, where it is truly according to Christ’s order, taught, believed, and practiced."82

3. You can recognize "the people of God or the Christian holy people on the holy sacrament of the altar, there where it is truly, according to Christ’s order, taught, believed, and practiced."83

4. You can recognize "the people of God or holy Christians on the keys which they publicly use." In this forth sign of the visible church Luther is speaking of church discipline, which includes censorship and even excommunication. The keys should be administered publicly and privately.84

5. You can also outwardly recognize the church on church order, that is, she ordains "servants of the church." "You have to have bishops, ministers or preachers, which publicly and specially administer the above mentioned four signs." These servants act on behalf and in the name of the church.85

6. Furthermore you can recognize the "holy Christian people" because of prayer, and because they publicly praise and thank God. "There, where you see and hear, that one prays the Lord’s Prayer and learns to pray, also where one sings Psalms and spiritual songs, and teaches publicly faith, the Ten Commandments and the Catechism, there you should know, that there is a holy Christian people of God."86

7. You can also recognize outwardly the people of God where you find the people of God suffering and persecuted for Christ’s sake.87

After these basic seven outward signs Luther lists seven other works that relate to the second table of the Decalogue. The holy life, that is, Christian sanctification, is a true sign, by which you (at least outwardly) can recognize

81 Ibid., 629.
82 Ibid., 630.
83 Ibid., 631.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 632-33.
86 Ibid., 641.
87 Ibid.
the church of God. The Decalogue plays an important role here. Not only does it reveal the will of God, but it also discloses what is lacking in the life of God’s people. Such knowledge keeps the believer humble and drives him/her to Christ, so that each longs even more “to become a new creature in Christ.”

Calvin’s View of the Church

It is easier to study of Calvin’s ecclesiology, because of his systematic classic, “The Institutes of the Christian Religion.” The fourth book with its twenty chapters is devoted to “The Holy Catholic Church.” It is, of course, not easy to summarize Calvin’s several hundred pages on this topic in just a page or two! But we will try to summarize.90

L. Berkhof gives us our direction: “The Reformed conception of the Church is fundamentally the same as the Lutheran, though differing from it in some relatively important points.” Since we do not wish to repeat ourselves, we will present mainly those views of the reformer where they differ with Luther.

Both Luther and Calvin agree on the distinction between the “visible” and the “invisible” church. But Calvin, under the influence of Augustine and Bucer, explains the “invisibility” of the church from the premise of predestination; Luther explains the “invisible” church from the premise of the “unseen” workings of “faith” and “grace.” For Calvin, the true church, the inner church, which is “invisible” to the mortal eye, is the elect of God, predestined from eternity.92

On the other hand Calvin places a strong emphasis on the “visible” church. In the physical church the characteristics of “unity” and “holiness” are obtained not so much by the objective ordinances (especially the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, as Luther would suggest) as by the more subjective communion of the believers who are exhorted to holy living.93 The “mother” is the single title of the visible church. She conceived us, gave us birth and

88 Ibid., 643.
89 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 4, which in Henry Beveridge’s ed. (Grand Rapids, 1966), is found in vol. 2, 277-676, from whom we quote.
90 See Heggland, 242; Berkhof, 237-38; Francois Wendel, Calvin, Ursprung und Entwicklung seiner Theologie (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1968), 257-75.
91 Berkhof, 237-38.
92 Calvin, Catechismus genevensis, 1545, 3rd ed. of the confession of faith (cf. Hirsch, 211). See also Institutes, Book 3, chap. 21, which carries the title, “Of the eternal election, by which God has predestinated some to salvation, and others to destruction.” Also chaps. 22-24 deal with this issue (Institutes 2:202-258).
93 Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, chap. 1,4.5 (Inst. 2,283-84). Also Calvin’s understanding of regeneration and sanctification should be consulted, see, Book 3, chaps. 2-8 (Institutes 1:467-582 and 2:1-24).
nourishes us—expressions which remind us of Augustine. "For the weakness does (the mother) not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be obtained for, as Isaiah and Joel testify (Isa 37:32; Joel 2:32)." 94

Therefore "we see that God, who might perfect His people in a moment, chooses not to bring them to manhood in any other way than by the education of the church." 95 This is the reason why we have the pastor, the teachers, the elders, and the deacons—the typical fourfold officers for Calvin's church order—to guide and instruct, to comfort and reprimand the saints on their road to eternity. 96

According to Calvin's commentary on Acts 2:42, Luke mentions four signs by which the true church could be seen:

1. The pure teachings of the apostles.
2. The fellowship of the saints in brotherly love.
3. The celebration of the Lord's Supper.
4. The earnest prayers of the believers. 97

In his Institutes he summarizes the signs of the "visible" church in this way:

We have said that the symbols by which the Church is discerned are the preaching of the word and the observance of the sacraments, for these cannot anywhere exist without producing fruit and prospering by the blessing of God. I say that wherever the word is preached fruit immediately appears; but that in every place where it is received, and has a fixed abode, it uniformly displays its efficacy. Be this as it may, when the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard, and the sacraments are not neglected, there for the time the face of the church appears without deception or ambiguity and no man may with impunity spurn her authority, or reject her admonitions, or resist her counsels, or make sport of her censure, far less revolt from her, and violate unity. 98

Ecclesiology of the Radical Reformation

On Saturday, January 21, 1525, at the house of Felix Mantz in Zürich, Switzerland, Georg Blaurock, a former priest, confessed his sins and then was baptized by Conrad Grebel, a layman. During the following week 35 persons

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94 Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, chap. 1:4 (Institutes 2:283).
95 Ibid., chap. 1:5 (p. 284).
96 See more on church order and polity, Wendel, 268ff.
97 Calvin, Kommentar zur Apostelgeschichte. 1560 (cf. Hirsch, 212-13).
98 Calvin, Institutes, Book 4, chap. 1:10 (Institutes 2:289-90).
were baptized in the nearby village of Zollikon. Shortly after this, Wilhelm Reublin went to Waldshut, some 30 miles north of Zürich, and baptized one of the later well-known Anabaptist leaders, Balthasar Hubmaier, and 60 others. During the Easter season of that same year, Hubmaier, in turn, baptized 300 new converts.

These events marked the beginning of the Anabaptist movement.99 It spread in the course of the next five to six years from Switzerland in the south through Germany to the Netherlands in the northwest and Prussia in the northeast.100 Some call this movement the “Left wing of the Reformation”;101 others prefer the expression “Radical Reformation.”102 Some want to dissociate the Anabaptists from Protestantism and call them neither Catholic nor Protestant.103 While another Anabaptist scholar, R. Friedmann, sees in Anabaptism a third church-historical force at the time of the Reformation, alongside the so-called magisterial Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.104

Anabaptists were indeed a third force, although heavily persecuted. The movement was radical, especially when we think of that term’s origin from “radix,” that is, “root.” Anabaptists were Protestant, because they definitely “protested.” They were also Protestants, because they held in common with the Lutherans and the Reformed such key teachings as the call back to Scripture as the only source of appeal and that man’s salvation depended on God’s grace, received by faith.

On the other hand Anabaptists differed widely with their fellow Protestants on their understanding of ecclesiology. It would be fascinating to analyze the theological background for this ecclesiology, but then we would have to investigate their understanding of original sin, of grace, and of free will. The present writer is convinced that we would find in these subjects not only the basis for their departure from the main reformers but also the basis for their ecclesiology.

The Anabaptists were foremost against the Augustinian idea of “massa

100 Wolfgang Schäufele, Das missionarische Bewusstsein und Wirken der Täufer, vol. 21 in the series Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1966), 12ff.
102 E.g., George H. Williams, see Friedmann, 18.
104 Friedmann, 18.
perditiones” (which the Reformers accepted). From this root stems the doctrine of predestination against which the Anabaptists strongly revolted. They felt it was unworthy of God and not beneficial for man. For Anabaptists, this meant that children under the age of reasoning, not yet baptized, were not condemned. They stood under the universal grace of God and would be saved. Man, with his free will still intact, would (when coming to the age of reason), decide for himself for or against God.

This position naturally underscored the necessity of believers’ baptism as the door to the church of God. The church was a visible brotherhood, a fellowship of believers, a gathering of active disciples, a “Gemeinde,” rather than a “Volkskirche,” where everybody was part of it, where society and church were identical.

The Anabaptists saw a sharp dualism between church and world and wanted to reform the church or rather to restore the church according to the model of the “golden age of the church,” that is, the time of the apostles. The understanding of believer’s baptism and the practicing of the ban, that is, the disciplining of church members, were to be the means of establishing the pure church, the church of the spiritual elite, the only true church, the church of real believers, who’s lives are marked by living faith, obedience, and active discipleship.

**Marks of the Fallen Church**

Anabaptists stood under the firm conviction that the Christian church had fallen away from truth and had to be radically reformed. What constituted the fall of the church, and what were the marks of the fallen church? In general terms, departure from apostolic teaching constituted the fall. The marks of this fall reveal also what Anabaptists thought about the church. The major marks that identified the fallen church included the following:

1. The fallen church is characterized by its union with the state. Religion then becomes compulsory. According to Anabaptists, Christian churches are voluntary associations. Thus, genuine Anabaptists were among the first to uphold religious liberty, even as it is understood in the modern use of the term.

2. The fallen church engages in war. Church history books are replete with accounts of Christians killing Christians, a thought unthinkable to most An-

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106 Beachy, 40.
107 Friedmann, 116-17.
108 Beachy, 87.
109 Friedmann, 27ff.
abaptists. They believed that Christians should be peacemakers and not engage in armed struggles of any kind. Most Anabaptists were pacifists.

3. The fallen church celebrates the mass. Anabaptists opposed the idea that Christ was bodily present in the bread and the wine. Here, they collided head-on with Martin Luther as well as with Rome. They believed that Christ offered Himself once for all on the cross. The Lord's Supper (the church was enjoined to celebrate) simply commemorated the event.

4. The fallen church practices infant baptism. The Anabaptists knew that the state-church idea stands or falls with infant baptism. That is why they vehemently opposed it.

5. The fallen church is seen also in the rise of the hierarchy. They especially attacked the ecclesiastic’s lust for power and wealth. They wanted to return to the old democracy of believers coming together to worship God inwardly, instead of engaging in long liturgies, outward ceremonies, and formal processions.

Anabaptists believed that all earnest Christians should leave this fallen church. They viewed the fall as so deep that a little reform here and there would not help. For this reason they could not join hands with the other reformers whom they saw as trying only to reform certain abuses and errors.

**Marks of the True Church**

The Anabaptists wished to return to the apostolic church. They considered the true church to be visible and identifiable. The following are some of the identifying marks they believed would be present in the true church:

1. The true church follows the teaching of Scripture, especially the NT.
2. The true church practices believer’s baptism.
3. The true church understands the Lord’s Supper in a simple way, as a meal of remembrance, The Lord’s Supper was very important to the Anabaptists because it confronted people with Christ who died for them, and through whose death they received the forgiveness of sins. They saw the true church’s approach to the Lord’s Supper as standing in contrast with the philosophical and speculative disputations other Christians engaged in at the time of the Reformation—disputations on the nature of Christ’s presence in the elements and how grace benefits believers.
4. The true church understands clearly that it consists of truly converted, regenerated members, who voluntarily join the association of believers. Since God intended the church to be a community of saints, believers should be exhorted to holy living.

If a member was unwilling to be reconciled with his brother or sister,
or persistently lived in sin, he/she would be placed under the spiritual ban. In other words, members would refrain from social contact with such a person, and he/she would lose all privileges of the church or brotherhood. Ultimately this person would be excluded from the fellowship.

5. The true church has an understanding of community. Anabaptists held that the material goods God had given should be shared freely with other believers, especially those who had nothing because they were being persecuted. Some groups of Anabaptists, like the Hutterites, went so far as to practice a kind of “communism,” not only sharing everything with each other but also having a common production in establishing “Brüderhöfe,” as they called them. But all Anabaptists were taught that “every good and perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17, NIV) and should, therefore, be shared with the needy. Anabaptist leaders were chosen by the local congregation and at times supported by freewill collections.

6. The true church is marked by its correct relation to the civil authorities. Anabaptists believed that magistrates were ordained to chasten evil, and so must discharge that aspect of their office. However, Christians should not hold political office, because magistrates must engage in practices that Christians could not. For example, magistrates should restrain evil and destroy the enemies of society. But Christians should love their enemies and pray for their persecutors. The Anabaptists’ noninvolvement in politics and their aloofness from social life in general created many difficulties.

7. The true church engages in the Great Commission to go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to all creatures. This was central to the Anabaptists’ understanding of the church. They believed that all Christians received this commission, so they considered everyone a teacher/preacher. Everyone must witness.

No provincial, national, or ecclesiastical boundaries should stop a person from fulfilling the gospel commission of the risen Lord. With the Anabaptists, as with other reform movements before them, we find a true reawakening of the missionary spirit of the early church. They were prepared, as many Christians in the first three centuries had been, to die for their faith, to lay down their lives as martyrs.110

110 The summery has been taken from my article in Ministry; see there also the biographical references. R. Müller, “Identifying the True Church,” in Ministry, September 1986, 17-19.
Conclusion

What then constitutes the church? After this broad overview of the various ecclesiological positions that arose over a space of fifteen hundred years, from the time of the Apostolic Fathers to the Anabaptists, it is not easy to say without qualification what the church is, where it is found, and who belongs to it. As we have seen, truth is also there where most error is, and error is also there where most truth is.

Be that as it may, from our understanding of the remnant idea of the OT and the ecclesia of the NT, we may say that the church is a voluntary fellowship of active followers of Christ, who in witness and holy living (and maybe even suffering) are on a pilgrimage under the sign of the cross toward the “New Jerusalem” which they hope soon to see.

There will be no distinction between the so-called laity and the clergy, because the church is the laos, that is, the people of God. The church composes the “priesthood of all believers,” who are organized in a proper democratic way. The Holy Spirit is given to all its members—who have no offices, but only services; no officers, but only servants.

The church is to stand separate from the power structure of the state, but of course, it will serve the populations of the state, believers and nonbelievers alike. By serving their neighbors, Christians serve God.

The church is there where the truth of Holy Scriptures is proclaimed and practiced, and where God’s revelation is the only source of authority for faith and living.

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