

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Church of God, in the days of the Apostles, as is well known, was not divided into different denominations. Even then, indeed, there were parties in the Church. The restless and selfish spirit of depraved human nature soon began, in different places to display its unhallowed influence, either in the form of judaizing claims, philosophical speculations, or turbulent opposition to regular ecclesiastical authority. In the Church of Corinth, though planted and nurtured by “the chiefest of the Apostles,” there were factious and troublesome members, who contended among themselves, and said, one to another, “I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ” [1 Corinthians 1:12]. Still the Church was one. The names, “Presbyterian,” “Episcopalian,” “Congregationalist,” etc., were unknown. All professing Christians, “though many, were considered as one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” [Romans 12:5]. The only popular distinction then recognized, as far as the professed followers of Christ were concerned, was between the Church and the heretics.

#### **The Catholic Church**

Not long after the Apostolic age, when heresies had become numerous, when each of them claimed to belong to the Church, and when convenience demanded the adoption of some term which might distinguish between the true or orthodox Church, and the various sects of errorists—the title of Catholic (or general, as the

term Catholic signifies) was applied to the former; while the latter were distinguished by various names, derived either from the nature of their distinguishing opinions, or from the original authors or promoters of those opinions. It is well known, indeed, that the blinded and superstitious followers of the Bishop of Rome claim the title of Catholic, as exclusively applicable to themselves.<sup>1</sup> In their own estimation, they are *the* Church, the *only* true Church, the *Catholic*, or *universal* Church; and all the other classes of nominal Christians, throughout the world, are *heretics*, out of the way of salvation. This claim, however, in the estimation of all enlightened Christians, is as presumptuous as it is vain. That department of nominal Christendom, instead of being the only true Church, is considered by many as too far gone in corruption to be comprehended under the Christian name at all; and instead of there being no salvation out of her communion, the danger of eternal perdition is rather to those who are found within her pale. It is not doubted, indeed, that there are many pious individuals within that pale; but it is believed that they are placed in circumstances deplorably unfavorable to their growth in grace; and that the multitudes around them, in the same communion, are immersed in darkness, superstition, and dreadful error, which place them in the utmost jeopardy of eternal perdition. This is that “Antichrist,” that “Man of sin,” and “Son of Perdition,” who exalteth himself above all that is called God, and who is yet to be “destroyed with the breath of Jehovah’s mouth, and with the

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1. Presbyterians, and confessional Protestants generally, have happily referred to the Bishop of Rome, who is the same figure whom Roman Catholics call the Pope. The point of calling him the Bishop of Rome is to deny the papal monarchy. See “Charles Hodge’s Letter to Pope Pius IX,” *The Banner of Truth* 415 (April 1998): 22-25. *The Banner of Truth* infelicitously titled this letter because Hodge actually addressed it “To Pius the Ninth, Bishop of Rome.”

brightness of his coming” [cf. II Thessalonians 2:3-4, 8].

No particular denomination of Christians is now entitled to be called, by way of eminence, the Catholic, or universal Church. There are Churches, indeed, which bear a nearer resemblance to the Apostolical model than others; and which deserve to be favorably distinguished in the list of Christian communities. But the visible Catholic Church is made up of all those throughout the world, who profess the true religion, together with their children. The Presbyterian, the Congregationalist, the Methodist, the Baptist, the Episcopalian, the Independent, who hold the fundamentals of our holy religion, in whatever part of the globe they may reside, are all members of the same visible community; and, if they be sincere believers, will all finally be made partakers of its eternal blessings. They cannot, indeed, all worship together in the same solemn assembly, even if they were disposed to do so. A physical impossibility forbids it; and, in many cases, prejudice and folly widely separate those who ought to be entirely united. Still, in spite of all the sects and names by which professing Christians are divided, there is *a visible Church Catholic*. There is a precious sense in which the whole visible Church on earth is *one*. All who “hold the Head,” of course belong to the body of Christ. Those who are united by a sound profession to the same divine Savior; who embrace the same precious faith; who are sanctified by the same Spirit [Hebrews 2:11]; who eat the same spiritual meat [I Corinthians 10:3]; who drink the same spiritual drink [I Corinthians 10:4]; who repose and rejoice in the same promises; and who are travelling to the same eternal rest [Hebrews 11:10]—are surely *one body*—*one* in a sense more richly significant and valuable than can be ascribed to millions who sustain and boast a mere nominal relation.

But while we thus maintain the doctrine of the unity of the visible Church Catholic; and while we rejoice in the assured belief, that sectarian names, as they were unknown in the Apostolic age, so they will be unknown among the members of the Redeemer's glorified body; still, in this militant state, there is a separation, not merely nominal, but real and deplorable; a separation which interferes most deeply with the communion of saints, and which lamentably mars those precious opportunities of proximity and intercourse, which too often, alas! become incentives to contention and strife, rather than to Christian love.

Amidst this diversity of sects and names, it becomes, to every intelligent and conscientious Christian, a most interesting question—which of the various denominations which bear the name of Christian Churches, may be considered as approaching nearest to the New Testament model? We freely acknowledge, indeed, as Churches of Christ, all who hold the fundamentals of our holy religion, and consider it as our duty to love and honor them as such; carefully avoiding all treatment of them that tends to the increase of strife and division, and that is contrary to “godly edifying.” Still, it cannot be doubted, by any rational man, that *some one* of these denominations is nearer to the Apostolic model, as a Church of Christ, than any of the rest. Which of the whole number this is, is a most serious question in the view of every one who wishes to know the will of Christ, and who desires to be found walking in that way which was trod by inspired Apostles, and in which they left the Church harmoniously walking, when they ceased from their labors.

It is the sincere belief of the writer of these pages, that the *Presbyterian Church*, as it now exists in these United States, entirely unconnected with the civil government, and taking the word of God