

The Church of Christ

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The Church of Christ is a worldwide community that began with the resurrection of Jesus Christ and has continued through the centuries due to its devotion to Him.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, John 14:6, John 20:29, Acts 2:32, Acts 4:12, 1 Corinthians 11:23, 1 Corinthians 15:3, Ephesians 4:4, Colossians 1:18, Hebrews 10:25

Topics: "Church History", "Christian Unity"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the origins and continuity of the Christian Church, emphasizing that its foundation lies in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the unwavering faith of early believers. The Church's persistence and growth throughout history are attributed to the personal relationship individuals have with Christ as their living Lord and Friend, a bond that transcends time and unites believers across different cultures and eras.

Transcript

When we stand on the Nore Lightship we see the Thames at its mouth; when we stand on the Cotswold Hills at Thames-head we see the great river at its source. When we look over the world today we see Christianity as a great and almost worldwide fact; but the stream must have had a source, the effect must have had a cause. Here all around us is the community which men call the Christian Church, the various communities which make up the totality of Christian profession. How did they come into being originally?

For our present purpose we take the Church in its widest sense, "the blessed company of all faithful people," or "all who profess and call themselves Christians." How did the Church begin? It has been well said that "the Church of Christ is built on an empty grave." Seven weeks after the Crucifixion the Apostle Peter preached in Jerusalem the resurrection of Jesus Christ; the weak and cowardly disciple was transformed into the bold witness, and in language as plain as it could possibly be, he declared to the Jews their sin of crucifying Christ, and the work of God in raising Him from the dead.

Not only was there no attempt on the part of the Jews to deny the Apostle's words, but, on the contrary, no less than three thousand of them believed what he said, accepted his word, obeyed his exhortation, and became united together in a new fellowship through his teaching and the ordinances of Baptism and the Holy Communion. There is no possibility of doubting that these men were drawn together into this new community by their separate individual new relation to Christ. Thus and thus only the Church began.

How did the Church continue? By the proclamation of the same message on the part of the Apostolic preachers, and by the reception of that message on the part of their hearers. Wherever they went the substance of their teaching was "Jesus and the Resurrection," and wherever it was given it was received through faith, and faith expressed itself in the ordinances of Baptism and the Communion as proofs of relationship to God, and also as marks of fellowship between those who professed and called themselves Christians.

This apostolic testimony meant persecution, ostracism, and not seldom death. Why should they have thus been willing to suffer? Why did they not remain silent, go to their homes in Galilee and prevent the Jewish authorities from hearing of them from that time forward? The answer is that they could not but speak of the things they had seen and heard. Jesus Christ was a reality to them, and out of a full heart they preached Him as a living Saviour and Lord. This is the fact that stands out prominently from the Day of Pentecost onwards through the entire New Testament - the fact of a new community whose one tie of fellowship was their relation to Christ, their common Master.

When we open the New Testament we find ourselves in presence of a glowing religious life. There is nothing in the world which offers any real parallel either to this life or to the collection of books which attests it. The soul, which in contemporary literature is bound in shallows and in miseries, is here raised as on a great tidal wave of spiritual blessing. Nothing that belongs to a complete religious life is wanting, neither convictions or motives, neither penitence nor ideals, neither vocation nor the assurance of victory.

And from the beginning to end, in all its parts and aspects and elements, this religious life is determined by Christ. It owes its character at every point to Him. [Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel*, p. 1.] Even a cursory study of the New Testament reveals the fact that the one and only thing that united men of different races, creeds, temperaments, and grades was their relation to Christ, while: The most careful scrutiny of the New Testament discloses no trace of a Christianity in which Jesus has any other place than that which is assigned Him in the faith of the historical Church. [Denney, *op. cit.*, p. 373.]

And the same thing is true of the books of the New Testament as records of teaching. In spite of the great and striking differences of aspect, standpoint, and substance between such writers as Paul, John, James, Peter, and Luke there is nothing more striking than the essential unity amid all these remarkable differences. This unity is simply that of a common attitude to Jesus Christ. Whatever they have to record or teach converges towards Him and has Him for its theme and object.

There is a unity in all these early Christian books which is powerful enough to absorb and subdue their differences, and that unity is to be found in a common religious relation to Christ, a common debt to Him, a common sense that everything in the relations of God and man must be and is determined by Him. [Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel*, p. 101.] But this problem of the Church thus begun and seen in the New Testament record of its first seventy years needs still more careful attention.

We have to account not only for its beginning and early years, but also for its continuance to this day. Its history is capable of being followed from century to century, from country to country, up to the present time, when we see it settled in many places, and ever extending to fresh parts in the non-Christian world. Now all through these centuries there has been not a little essential continuity of method in all parts of the Christian community. There are in fact four chains stretching across the centuries which link the Church of today with that of the first ages.

First, there is the proclamation of the Christian message. In spite of differences of substance and method, something which has been regarded as a Christian Gospel has been proclaimed by means of various ministries through all the ages. Pioneers have gone from land to land with a message, a message about Christ, and this has been proclaimed and received and passed on everywhere. Second, there is the rite of Baptism, which has almost invariably accompanied the proclamation of the message of Christianity.

This ordinance has been regarded and accepted as the occasion of initiation into Christianity, the proof of acceptance on the part of those who would become adherents. Third, there is the weekly worship on the first day. Christians have been accustomed from the very first to meet together on this day and celebrate their Master's resurrection. There is scarcely anything more thoroughly capable of demonstration than this fact from the very rise of Christianity. It is incapable of explanation that companies of Jews should in time have ceased to meet together on the seventh day and at length transferred their gatherings to the first unless there had been sufficient cause for altering so ancient and honored an observance.

Fourth, there is the worship and fellowship in the Lord's Supper. Christians have been in the habit of meeting every week for the specific purpose of remembering their Master's death. Now these four chains stretch across the centuries without the gap of a link and are found everywhere. How are they to be accounted for? Only in one way; as expressive of belief in and devotion of Jesus Christ on the part of the men and women who observed them. They were in use years before a line of our New Testament was written, so that our present records are not the cause of, but only an evidence for their existence.

This identity of observance compels attention, and can only be explained by the relation of the people to Jesus Christ. These Christians believed in the death, resurrection, and Deity of their Master, and the ordinances were the outward expression and proof of their faith. The evidential value of preaching, Baptism, the Lord's Day, and the Lord's Supper is of the very first importance and demands and warrants the closest attention. There is, however, one remarkable fact connected with the existence of the Church of Christ which is an additional factor in the problem.

Whenever Christianity has been faithfully proclaimed no compulsion has been used to lead men to believe in Christ, and, indeed, in all ages for the most part there has been no earthly advantage for men to become Christians. Not only so, but Christian profession has often meant social ostracism, persecution, and death. Both in regard to individual experience and to corporate life, opposition has had to be faced. Christianity has been checked and thwarted by civil and national authorities in almost every age.

Whether in the Roman Empire or among barbaric hordes, attempts have been made to crush and destroy Christianity. But the result has ever been to make the Church stronger than before. Now we have to account for this marvelous vitality, and we must have a sufficient explanation. If the law of causation obtains anywhere it surely applies here. Every effect must have its adequate cause. We have two problems to face which are, however, only parts of one still greater problem. The first is how to account for the New Testament attitude to Christ in the face of His death as a malefactor.

We do not always fully realize the nature of the issue here brought before us. Here is a young man scarcely thirty-three years of age, emerged from obscurity only for the brief space of three years, living during those years under the scorn of the world, which grew steadily in intensity and finally passed into hatred, and dying at the end the death of a malefactor: but leaving behind Him the germs of a worldwide community, the spring of whose vitality is the firm conviction that He was God manifest in the flesh.

If anything human is obvious, it is obvious that this conviction was not formed and fixed without evidence for it is of the most convincing kind. [Warfield, *The Lord of Glory*, p. 275.] In the New Testament we find Jews with all their monotheistic passion actually regarding Jesus of Nazareth as equal to God the Father, and this well within twenty-five years of the time at which He was put to death as a criminal. [Fairbairn, *Christ In Modern Theology*, p. 377.] The fact is so striking and even startling that it is scarcely surprising that attempts should be made to modify or break its force.

But it resists all such attempts, and remains one of the most convincing facts of early Church history. What I cannot credit is, that by the time of the earliest Christian records His followers had already distorted and mistaken Him altogether, so that the history of Christianity was built from the very foundation on a misunderstanding and a misrepresentation, behind which we must, after two thousand years, get back, if we are to have a real Christ and a genuine Christianity.

"Back to Christ" is the watchword of theology in this generation; and I will repeat it with an enthusiasm born of a lifelong study of His words; but, when I go back to Him, I do not find a Christ who puts to shame the highest which His Church has taught about Him. He is different indeed - far more simple, actual, and human - yet in all that is most essential He is the same Son of God as for nineteen centuries has inspired the lives of the saints and evoked the worship of the world. [Stalker, *The Christology of Jesus*, p. 122.]

The second part of the problem is the persistence of this view of Christ in relation to the Church all through the Christian centuries. It is no mere question, interesting and important as it is, of something happening nineteen centuries ago, as a fact of history; it is the question of the existence of a living, widespread, and ever-growing society, which has never been more alive than it is at present. And it is the existence of a society by means of one fact only, the persistent influence of Jesus Christ.

The one bond which unites Christians together, the one secret of continuance in the Christian Church, is essentially a personal relation to Christ as a living Lord and Friend. The most remarkable fact in the history of His religion is the continuous and ubiquitous activity of His person. He has been the permanent and efficient factor in its extension and progress. Under all its forms, in all its periods, and through all its divisions, the one principle alike of reality and unity has been and is devotion to Him.

He is the Spirit that inhabits all the Churches, the law that rules the conscience and binds into awed and obedient reverence the saintly men who lived within all the communions that bear His name. [Fairbairn, *Christ in Modern Theology*, p. 380.] And so we challenge attention to the existence of the Christian Church as a proof of the uniqueness and supernatural power of the Person of Jesus Christ, for we are confident that it is impossible to account for the former apart from a belief in the latter.

It is surely more probable that the Christian view of Christ arose out of the history than that the entire Christian Church should have invented a history to explain its foundation. The very divisions of the Christian Churches constitute an argument in support of this position, for this view of Christ is common to all the communities and underlies all their differences. How did the Church come by its faith in Christ? At least the history explains the faith, but the faith cannot fairly explain away the history. [Garvie, *The Inner Life of Jesus*, p. 45.]

The connection between Jesus and the Christian religion remains; and unless we are content to leave it entirely in the dark, we shall find ourselves compelled to raise the ulterior question which by this assumption is foreclosed. Granting that the figure in the Gospels is the product of the Church's faith, by what was that faith itself produced? The New Testament taken as a whole represents the most

astonishing outburst of intellectual and spiritual energy in the history of our race: by what was it evoked?

Surely the probabilities are that some extraordinary reality - something quite unlike the rest of us - lies behind and explains all this. [Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel*, p. 166.] The problem of the Christian Church, then, has to be faced and solved. Its history requires some operative cause adequate to explain nineteen centuries of existence and progress. It is true that there have been other religions with millions of adherents, but it is also true that the existence and progress of the Church is something unique in history to say nothing of the fact that Christianity has attracted to itself the profoundest thinkers of the human race, and is in no way hindered by the ever-advancing tide of human knowledge.

The Church is, and ever has been, in such direct and constant relation to Christ that only His personality can explain its continued life and movement. The most extraordinary and inexplicable thing in the New Testament is the power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth over His early followers, and the most marvelous and astonishing thing in nineteen centuries of history is the power of His life over the members of the Christian Church.

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