

OF THE NATURE OF A GOSPEL CHURCH,
THE SEAT OF PUBLIC WORSHIP
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HAVING treated of the object of worship, and distinguished worship into internal and external; and having considered internal worship as it lies in the exercise of various graces; I now proceed to consider external worship, both public and private: and first public worship; and as public worship is carried on socially in a church state, I shall begin with considering the nature of a gospel church, the seat of it. The word *church* has various significations, which it may be proper to take notice of, in order to settle the true sense of it, as now to be discoursed of.

First, some take it for a place of worship, and call such a place by that name; but wrongly, at least very improperly: it is a remarkable saying of one of the ancients, even of the second century, ?Not the place, but the congregation of the elect, I call the church.?¹

Indeed, any place of worship was formerly called an house of God; so the place where Jacob and his family worshipped, having built an altar for God, was called Bethel or the house of God, Genesis 35:1, so the tabernacle of Moses is called, the house of God in Shiloh, Judges 18:31, and the temple built by Solomon, the house of the Lord, I Kings 6:1, 2, 39. But neither of them are ever called a church. The papists, indeed, call an edifice built for religious worship, a church; and so do some Protestants; I might add, some dissenting Protestants too; who call going to a place of public worship, going to church; though with great impropriety. It must be owned, that some of the ancient fathers used the word in this metonymical and improper sense, for the place where the church met for worship: and some passages of scripture are pleaded for this use of it; which yet do not seem to be plain and sufficient: not Acts 19:37, for the word *ierosulouv*, should not be rendered *robbers of churches*, but *robbers of temples*; and design not edifices built for Christian worship; but the temples of the heathens, as that of Diana, at Ephesus: but what may seem more plausible and pertinent, are some passages in I Corinthians 11:18, 20, 22. ?*When ye come together in the church I hear?*, etc. which is thought to be after explained; ?*When ye come together into one place: have ye not houses to eat and drink in? or despise ye the church of God??*

All this, indeed, supposes a place to meet in; though rather not the place, but the assembly that met in it, is called the church; and their coming together in the church may intend no other than some of the members coming and meeting together with the rest of the church; and *epi to auto*, which we render *into one place*, may design, not the unity of the place, but the unanimity of the people in it: nor is the opposition between their own houses and the place of meeting; and this is only mentioned to show that it would have been much more suitable and decent in them to have eat and drank in their own houses, than in the presence of the assembly and church of God, which was to their scandal, reproach, and contempt; for not the place, but the people that met in it, were properly the object of contempt: however, it is certain, that there are numerous places of scripture which cannot be understood of any material edifice or building; whether of stone, brick, or wood;² as when it is said, ?*tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church?*, Acts 11:22 it would be absurd to understand it in such a sense; and so many others.

Secondly, the word *ekklesia*, always used for *church*, signifies an *assembly* called and met together,³ and sometimes it is used for an assembly, whether lawfully or unlawfully convened; so the people who got together, upon the uproar made by the craftsmen at Ephesus, is called, *a confused assembly*, and suggested to be an unlawful one; since the town clerk told them the matter should be determined in *a lawful assembly*; and when he had thus spoken, *dismissed the assembly* Acts 19:32, 39, 41 in which passages the same word is used which commonly is for a *church*; and which may be considered either as a general, or as a particular assembly of persons.

1st, as a general assembly, called, *“The general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven?”*, Hebrews 12:23, and which include all the elect of God, that have been, are, or shall be in the world; and who will form the pure, holy, and undefiled Jerusalem church state, in which none will be but those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life; and this consists of the redeemed of the Lamb, and is the *church* which Christ has *purchased* with his blood; and who make up his spouse, the *church* he has *loved*, and given himself for, to wash, and cleanse, and present to himself a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle; this is the *body*, the church, of which Christ is the *head*; and in which he is the sole officer, being Prophet, Priest, and King of it; it being, not the seat of human government, as a particular church is: and this church is but *one*, though particular churches are many: to this may be applied the words of Christ; *“My dove, my undefiled, is but one?”*, Song of Solomon 6:9, and this is what sometimes is called by divines, the *invisible church*; not but that the whole number of God’s elect is visible to him, and known by him; *“The Lord knows them that are his?”*; and the election of particular persons may be known by themselves, by the grace bestowed upon them; and, in a judgment of charity, may be concluded of others, that they are the chosen of God, and written in the book of life: but all the particular persons, and the number of them, were never yet seen and known; John had a sight of them in a visionary way, and they will be all really and actually seen, when the new Jerusalem shall descend from God out of heaven, as a bride adorned for her husband; which will be at the second coming of Christ, and not before; till that time comes, this church will be invisible. It is sometimes distinguished into the church *triumphant* and *militant*, the whole family named of God in heaven and earth. The church *triumphant* consists of the saints in glory, whom Christ has taken to himself, to be with him where he is; and this is continually increasing. The church *militant* consists of persons in the present state, which is said to be, *“as an army with banners?”*, Song of Solomon 6:4, this is made up of such who become volunteers in the day of Christ’s power; who put on the whole armor of God, and fight the good fight of faith; and in this state it will continue to the end of the world.

There is another sense in which the church may be said to be *catholic*, or *general*, as it may consist of such in any age, and in each of the parts of the world, who have true faith in Christ, and hold to him the head, and are baptized by one Spirit into one body; have one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, and are called in one hope of their calling: and this takes in, not only such who make a visible profession of Christ: but all such who are truly partakers of his grace; though they have not made an open profession of him in a formal manner; and this is the church which Polycarp called, *“the whole catholic church throughout the world?”*⁴ and Irenaeus,⁵ *“The church scattered throughout the whole world to the ends of the earth:?”* and Origen,⁶ *“The church of God under heaven:?”* and this is the church built on Christ the rock, against which the gates of hell shall never prevail; such a church Christ has always had and will have; and which may be, when there is no visible congregated church, or a particular church gathered according to gospel order; and of this the apostle seems to speak, when he says, *“Unto him be glory in the church, by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end?”*, Ephesians 3:21. But,

2dly, the church may be considered as a particular assembly of saints meeting together in one place for religious worship. Such was the first church at Jerusalem, which is called, the *whole church*, that met together in one place at the same time, Acts 1:14, 15; 2:1; 4:32; 15:22, and the church at Antioch, convened by the apostles, to whom they rehearsed what God had done with them, Acts 14:27 and these churches, in after times, continued to meet in one place; the whole church of Jerusalem, at the destruction of the city, removed to Pella, a town beyond Jordan, which was sufficient to receive the Christians that belonged to it;⁷ and two hundred and fifty years after Christ the church at Antioch met in one house.⁸ And so the church at Corinth, I Corinthians 14:23; 5:4, and the church of the disciples at Troas, who came together on the first day of the week to break bread, Acts 20:7, of these there were many in one province; as the churches of Judea, besides that at Jerusalem, and the churches of Galatia, Galatians 1:2, 23 and the seven churches of Asia, Revelation 1:4, and the churches of Macedonia, II Corinthians 8:1, the church at Cenchrea, a port of Corinth, and distinct from the church there, as were all these churches distinct from one another; so that he that was of one church, was not of another; as Epaphras is said to be *one of you*, of the church at Colosse, a peculiar member and minister of that church, and not of another, Colossians 4:12. And this is the church the nature of which is to be treated of; and may be considered *essentially*, as to the matter and form of it; and *organically*, as to its order and power or as a body corporate, having its proper officers.

I. *Essentially* considered, as to its matter and form, of which it consists.

First, as to the matter of it, both as to quantity and quality. As to number, Tertullian⁹ thought that three persons were sufficient to constitute a church; which may seem to be confirmed by Matthew 18:20, *Where two or three are gathered together in my name?*, etc. who may be sufficient to meet and pray together, and edify one another; but a judicial process in a church way, in case of offence, as directed to in some preceding verses, seems to require more; seeing, if the offending and offended parties cannot compromise things among themselves, one or two more are to be taken, which if two make four; if reconciliation cannot be made, the matter must be brought before the church, which must consist of a greater number than the parties before concerned; and which it should seem cannot be less than six more, and in all ten; which was the number of a congregation with the Jews:¹⁰ and a church organically considered, or as having proper officers, seems to require more; the church at Ephesus was begun with twelve men, or thereabout, Acts 19:7, yet a church should consist of no more than can meet together in one place, where all may hear, and all may be edified; and if it should be so increased that this cannot be, then it should be divided into lesser communities; as an hive of bees, when too many, swarms; and which seems to be the case of the church at Jerusalem; which, upon the departure of those who were converted at Pentecost, and on the scattering of the church by persecution, formed several churches in Judea, and accounts for the early mention of them. But not to dwell on this, the quality of the materials of a gospel church more especially deserves attention. In general, it may be observed, that all such who are of immoral lives and conversations, and of unsound principles, as to the doctrines of the gospel, are not proper persons to be members of a gospel church; no unclean persons, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, have, or should have, any inheritance, part or portion in the kingdom of God, as that may signify, as it sometimes does, a gospel church state; and though there may be such secretly, who creep in unawares, yet when discovered are to be excluded; and such persons, therefore, who are to be put away from a church, as wicked men, and such as walk disorderly, are to be withdrawn from, and such as have imbibed false doctrines, are to be rejected; then most certainly such are not knowingly to be admitted into the original constitution of a church of Christ, or be at first received into the fellowship of one. The persons who are fit materials of a visible gospel church, are described,

1. As regenerate persons; *Except a man be born again of water and of the Spirit?*, of the grace of the Spirit of God, *he cannot enter?*, of right he ought not to enter, and, if known, ought not to be allowed to enter, *into the kingdom of God?*, into a gospel church state; none but such who are begotten again to a lively hope of the heavenly inheritance, and who, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word and ordinances, that they may grow thereby, having tasted that the Lord is gracious; or, in other words, of whom it is *meet to think*, and, in a judgment of charity and discretion, to hope and conclude that God hath begun a *good work* in them; such were the members of the church at Philippi, Philippians 1:6, 7.

2. As called ones; a church is a congregation of such who are called out from among others, by the grace of God; both the Hebrew and Greek words *hlq* and *ekklhsia*, signify an assembly of persons called and convened together; so the members of the church at Rome are styled, *the called of Jesus Christ?*, Romans 1:6, such who are called out of the world, and from fellowship with the men of it, *into the fellowship of Jesus Christ?*: such who are proper materials of a gospel church, are such who are called out of a state of bondage to sin, Satan, and the law, into the liberty of the gospel; and out of darkness into marvelous light; and are called with an holy calling, and called to be saints, not merely by the external ministry of the word, to outward holiness of life and conversation, who are never effectually called by the grace of God, nor have any appearance of it, and so unfit to be members of churches; for,

3. Such are not only called to be saints, but in and by the effectual calling become really saints, at least are judged to be so, by a charitable discretion of them; so the members of the churches at Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, and Colosse, are described as *saints*, and *sanctified* persons, and as *holy temples*, built for habitations of an holy God; hence they are called *churches of the saints*, because they consist of such; and Christ, who is King and head of the church, is called *King of saints?*, I Corinthians 14:33; Revelation 15:3.

4. They are described as the *faithful in Christ Jesus*, or believers in him: so in the article of the church of England a church is defined, *A congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered.* For only faithful men, or believers in Christ, can have fellowship with the saints in a church state; and none but such can have communion with Christ; for he dwells in the hearts of men by faith, and they live by faith upon him: and only such have a right to the ordinances of Christ, and can receive benefit by them; unless they believe with all the heart, they have no right to baptism; and unless they have faith in Christ, they cannot discern the Lord's body in the supper; nor is the gospel preached of any profit to them, not being mixed with faith; so that they are on all accounts unfit for church membership; and hence we read, that those who were joined to the first church at Jerusalem were believers, Acts 5:14, see Acts 2:41, 47. Hence,

5. Those that were added to the church at Jerusalem are said to be, *such as should be saved?*; as all those who believe and are baptized, shall be saved; according to Mark 16:16. And besides, these were added by the Lord himself, as well as to him, and therefore should be saved by him with an everlasting salvation: and such who are admitted to church fellowship, should be such, who, in a judgment of charity or in charitable discretion, may be hoped, that they are the chosen of God, the redeemed of Christ, are called, sanctified, and justified, and so shall be everlastingly saved.

6. They should be persons of some competent knowledge of divine and spiritual things, and of judging of them; who have not only knowledge of themselves, and of their lost estate by

nature, and of the way of salvation by Christ; but who have some degree of knowledge of God in his nature, perfections, and works; and of Christ, in his Person as the Son of God; of his proper Deity; of his incarnation; of his offices, as Prophet, Priest, and King; of justification by his righteousness; pardon by his blood; satisfaction by his sacrifice; and of his prevalent intercession: and also of the Spirit of God: his person, offices, and operations; and of the important truths of the gospel, and doctrines of grace; or how otherwise should the church be *?the pillar and ground of truth??*

7. The materials of a gospel church should be men of holy lives and conversations; holiness both of heart and life becomes the house of God, and those who are of it; none should have a place in it but such; see Psalm 15:1, 2; 24:3, 4.

8. Such who are admitted into fellowship with a particular church of Christ, should be truly baptized in water, that is, by immersion, upon a profession of their faith; so the three thousand penitents, after they had gladly received the word, were baptized; and then, and not before, were added to the church: so the first church at Samaria consisted of men and women baptized by Philip, they believing what he said concerning the kingdom of God: and Lydia, and her household, and the jailor and his, being baptized upon their faith, laid the foundation of the church at Philippi: and the church at Corinth was begun with persons who, hearing the word, believed, and were baptized; and the church at Ephesus was first formed by some disciples baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, Acts 2:41; 8:12; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5, so the members of the churches at Rome, Galatia, and Colosse, were baptized persons, Romans 6:3,4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12. But,

9. Not their infants with them; who were neither baptized nor admitted to membership in the churches; no one instance of either can be produced in scripture: they are not members by birth,¹¹ for *?that which is born of the flesh, is flesh?*, carnal and corrupt, and unfit for church fellowship: nor do they become such by the faith of their parents; for even their faith does not make them themselves church members, without a profession of it, and giving up themselves to a church, and received by it into it: men must be believers before they are baptized; and they must be baptized before they become members; and they cannot be members till they make application to a church, and are admitted into it. Infants, as they are born, are not fit for membership, being unregenerate, unholy, and impure by their first birth, and must be born again ere they are fit for the kingdom of God, or a gospel church state; their federal holiness, talked of, is a mere chimera, and is unsupported by I Corinthians 7:14, they are not capable of understanding and of answering questions put unto them; nor of giving up themselves to a church; nor of consent and agreement to walk with it, the nature of which they are unacquainted with, and of what belongs to a member of it, either as to duty or privilege; nor are they capable of answering the ends of church communion, the mutual edification of members and the glory of God: and such who plead for their membership make a poor business of it; not treating them as members, neither by admitting them to the ordinance of the supper, nor by watching over them, reproof, admonishing, and laying them under censures, when grown up, and require them, were they members.

Secondly, a particular church may be considered as to the *form* of it; which lies in mutual consent and agreement, in their covenant and confederation with each other.

1. There must be an union, a coalition of a certain number of persons to form a church state, *one* cannot make a church; and these must be united, as the similies of a tabernacle, temple, house, body, and a flock of sheep, to which a church is sometimes compared, show; the tabernacle was made with ten curtains, typical of the church of God; but one curtain did

not make a tabernacle, nor all the ten singly and separately taken; but there were certain loops and taches, with which they were coupled together; and being thus joined, they composed the tabernacle. So the temple of Solomon, which was another type of the gospel church: and which was made of great and costly stones; these stones, not as in the quarry, nor even when hewed and squared, lying singly by themselves, made the temple, until they were put and cemented together, and the headstone brought in and laid on: thus truly gracious souls, though they are by grace separated from the common quarry of mankind, and are hewn by the Spirit of God, and by the ministry of the word, and are fit materials for the church of God, yet do not constitute one, until *fitly framed together*, and so grow unto an holy temple of the Lord. A church is called the house of God, a spiritual house, built up of lively stones, living saints; but these, be they ever so lively and living, they do not form a church, unless they are builded together, *for an habitation of God.* A church of Christ is often compared to an human body; which is not one member, but many; and these not as separate, but members one of another; who are *fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplieth*: and sometimes it is called a flock, the flock of God; and though a little flock, yet one sheep does not make a flock, nor two or three straggling ones; but a number of them collected together, feeding in one pasture, under the care of a shepherd.

2. This union of saints in a church state, is signified by their being *joined* and as it were glued together;¹² see Acts 5:13; 9:26, it is an union of spirits so close, as if they were but one spirit; so the members of the first Christian church were *of one heart and one soul*, being *knit together in love*; and it becomes members to endeavor to *keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*, Acts 4:32; Colossians 2:2; Ephesians 4:3.

3. This union between them is made by voluntary consent and agreement; a Christian society, or a church of Christ, is like all civil societies, founded on agreement and by consent; thus it is with societies from the highest to the lowest; kingdoms and states were originally formed on this plan; everybody corporate, as a city, is founded on the same plan; in which there are privileges to be enjoyed, and duties to be performed; and no man has a right to the one, without consenting to the other: and in lower societies, no man can be admitted into them, nor receive any benefit from them, unless he assents to the rules and articles on which the society is founded. All civil relations, except the natural relation of parents and children, which arises from the law of nature, are by consent and covenant; as that of magistrates and subjects, and of masters and servants, and of husband and wife; which latter, as it is by compact and agreement, may serve to illustrate the relation between a church and its members added to it, and the manner in which they be, by consent; see Isaiah 62:5.

4. As the original constitution of churches is by consent and confederation, so the admission of new members to them, is upon the same footing: the primitive churches in the times of the apostles, *first gave their own selves to the Lord*, as a body, agreeing and promising to walk in all his commandments and ordinances, and be obedient to his laws, as King of saints; *and to us*, the apostles, pastors, guides, and governors, to be taught, fed, guided, and directed by them, according to the word of God; and to one another also, *by the will of God*, engaging to do whatever in them lay, to promote each other's edification and the glory of God: and so all such who were added to them, it was done by mutual consent, as it always should be; as no man is to be forced into a church, or by any compulsory methods brought into it, so neither can he force himself into one; he has no right to come into a church, and depart from it when he pleases; both the one and the other, his coming into it and departure from it, must be with consent: a man may propose himself to be a member of a church, but it is at the option of the church whether they will receive him; so Saul

assayed to join himself to the disciples, that is, he proposed to be a member with them, but they at first refused him, fearing he was not a true disciple, because of his former conduct; but when they had a testimony of him from Barnabas, and perceived that he was a partaker of the grace of God, and was sound in the faith of Christ, they admitted him, and he was with them going out and coming in: and it is but reasonable a church should be satisfied in these points, as to the persons received into their communion; not only by a testimony their becoming lives, but by giving an account of what God has done for their souls, and a reason of the hope that is in them; as well as by expressing their agreement with them in their articles of faith.

5. Something of this kind may be observed in all religious societies, from the beginning, that they were by agreement and confederation; so the first religious societies in families, and under the patriarchal dispensation, it was by the agreement of families, and the common consent of them, that they met and joined together for public worship, to call on the name of the Lord, Genesis 4:26, so the Jewish church, though national in some sense, yet was constituted by confederation; God prescribed to them laws in the wilderness, and they covenanted and consented to obey them, Exodus 24:7, he avouched them to be his people, and they avouched him to be their God; and then, and not before, were they called a *church*, Acts 7:38, and so the gospel church was spoken of in prophecy, as what should be constituted and increased by agreement and covenant, Isaiah 44:5; 56:6, 7; Jeremiah 50:5, all which agrees with New Testament language; from whence it appears to be fact, that it was by consent and agreement that the first churches were formed, as before observed, and not otherwise; and nothing else but mutual consent, can make a man a church member: not faith it, the heart for that cannot be known until a man declares and professes it; nor a bare profession of faith, which, though necessary to membership, does not declare a man a member of one church more than of another, nor entitle more to one than to another; unless he gives up himself to a church, and professes his desire to walk with it in a subjection to the gospel of Christ: nor baptism, though a prerequisite to church fellowship, does not make a man a member of a church, as it did not the eunuch: nor hearing the word; for men ignorant and unbelievers may come into an assembly and hear the word, I Corinthians 14:24, yea, persons may hear the word aright, have faith, and profess it, and be baptized, and yet not be church members; it is only mutual consent that makes them such: persons must propose themselves to a church, and give up themselves to it, to walk in it, in an observance of the ordinances of Christ, and duties of religion; and the church must voluntarily receive them in the Lord. And,

6. Such a mutual agreement is but reasonable; for how should *two walk together except they be agreed??* Amos 3:3, and unless persons voluntarily give up themselves to a church and its pastor, they can exercise no power over them, in a church way; they have nothing to do with them that are without, they have no concern with the watch and care of them; nor are they entitled thereunto, unless they *submit themselves to one another in the fear of God?*; they have no power to reprove, admonish, and censure them in a church way; nor can the pastor exercise any pastoral authority over them, except by agreement they consent to yield to it; nor can they expect he should watch over their souls as he that must give an account, having no charge of them by any act of theirs. Now,

7. It is this confederacy, consent, and agreement, that is the formal cause of a church; it is this which not only distinguishes a church from the world, and from all professors that walk at large, the one being within and the other without, but from all other particular churches; so the church at Cenchrea was not the same with the church at Corinth, though but at a little distance from it, because it consisted of persons who had given up themselves to it, and not to the church at Corinth; and so were members of the one and not of the

other; *one of you*, as Onesimus and Epaphras were of the church at Colosse, and not of another, Colossians 4:9, 12. From all which it follows,

8. That a church of Christ is not parochial, or men do not become church members by habitation in a parish; for Turks and Jews may dwell in the same parish: nor is it diocesan; for we never read of more churches under one bishop or pastor, though there may have been, where churches were large, more bishops or pastors in one church, Philippians 1:1 nor provincial, for we read of churches in one province; as of the churches of Judea, and of Galatia, and of Macedonia: nor national; nay, so far from it, that we not only read of more churches in a nation, but even of churches in houses, Romans 16:5; I Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2, nor presbyterian; for we never read of a church of presbyters or elders, though of elders ordained in churches; by which it appears there were churches before there were any presbyters or elders in them, Acts 14:23. But a particular visible gospel church is congregational; and even the church of England, which is national itself, defines a *visible church* to be a congregation of faithful men;? and, indeed, the national church of the Jews was in some sense congregational; it is sometimes called the *congregation*, Leviticus 4:13-15, they were a people separated from other nations, and peculiarly holy to the Lord; they met in one place, called, *the tabernacle of the congregation?*, and offered their sacrifices at one altar, Leviticus 1:3, 4 and 17:4, 5, and three times in the year all their males appeared together at Jerusalem; and besides, as Lightfoot¹³ observes, there were *stationary men* at Jerusalem, who were representatives of the whole congregation, and were at the sacrifices for them: the synagogues also, though not of divine institution, were countenanced by the Lord, and bore a very great resemblance to congregational societies; and is the word which answers to *congregation* in the Septuagint version, and is used for a Christian assembly in the New Testament, James 2:2, to which may be added, that such congregations and assemblies as gospel churches be, are prophesied of as what should be in gospel times; see Ecclesiastes 12:11; Isaiah 4:5. A church of saints thus essentially constituted, as to matter and form, have a power in this state to admit and reject members, as all societies have; and also to choose their own officers; which, when done, they come a complete organized church, as to order power; of which more hereafter.

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