

# **A Well-Ordered Church**

Laying a Solid Foundation  
for a Vibrant Church

William Boekestein and Daniel R. Hyde



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With loving gratitude to  
Art Boekestein:  
exemplary Christian,  
true churchman,  
devoted grandfather.  
—WB

To all my former pastoral interns,  
who have gone out  
seeking to bring the order of Christ's kingdom  
into the chaos of the world.  
—DRH



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# Chapter One

## The Church's Relation to Christ

**A**fter I<sup>1</sup> was converted from unbelief, the church I attended had a “baptism Sunday.” It was at that time that someone asked me, “Do you want to be baptized?” I had no idea what that was all about so I asked about it. I was told it was my personal choice to express my personal belief in Jesus. When the day came I was told to stand in a line; then my turn came and a microphone was thrust in my face: “Why do you want to be baptized?” Being the cocky basketball player I was, I think my answer was something like, “I believe in Jesus. Let’s do this!”

My Christian identity was my own personal thing. I had no idea how I related to my local church. I had no idea how *my* church related to *the* church or its Lord, Jesus Christ. No doubt this experience and blissful ignorance can be multiplied in our day. The only appropriate place to begin formulating our identity as Christians and churches is with Jesus Christ. This approach lifts up the church beyond how things seem in the here and now. This approach relieves us of the temptation of thinking too highly of ourselves as a church, on the one hand, and of thinking too negatively of ourselves as a church, on the other.

## **The Church Belongs to Christ**

Understanding the church's identity as rooted in Christ will also help us avoid a churchless Christianity, in which individual believers are members merely of the "invisible church" while not connected to a local body, and a Christ-less churchianity, in which the church is merely a collection of individuals existing for social purposes. Instead we begin with Jesus Christ, who is Lord of the church in the New Covenant. That he possesses the church and that it belongs to him is taught throughout the New Testament through the illustration of the church as a building. Jesus is the builder of the church (Matthew 16:18). Jesus is described as the foundation and cornerstone of the church (1 Corinthians 3:11, Ephesians 2:20). Jesus' possession of the church is also taught metaphorically; he is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:1-11). He is the shepherd and we are his sheep in the sheep pen (John 10:1-18). He is the head and we are the members of his body (Romans 12:3-8). He is the husband and we are his bride (Ephesians 5:25-33).

In our time of the virtual online church, "every member ministry" with no connection to ordained leadership, and the prevalence of the "just me and my Bible" attitude, it is necessary to hear again the basic biblical message as summarized by the Protestant Reformation confessions of faith: "the visible Church ... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (WCF, 25.2). It was to this visible church and not to any person or para-church organization that Jesus gave the keys of his kingdom (Matthew 16:13-20). Furthermore, biblical Christians believe, "since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it" (BC, art. 28).<sup>2</sup> The institutional, visible church is so vital! At the same time, in reading the above quotations, we need



to resist the pendulum swinging to the other extreme in which we equate the local church with salvation. Every true church finds its identity in the incarnate Son of God—not itself.

We may be accustomed to thinking of individual Christians as being the possession of Christ; we confess, “That *I*, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not *my* own, but belong to *my* faithful Savior Jesus Christ” (HC, Q&A 1).<sup>3</sup> But, not only are individual Christians bought with the blood of Christ, so is the church as a whole (Acts 20:28). This is expressed in a classic hymn:

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;  
She is His new creation by water and the Word;  
From heaven he came and sought her to be His holy bride;  
With his own blood he bought her, and for her life He died.<sup>4</sup>

Christ gave his life for his bride, which is the entire body of the elect (Ephesians 5:25–27). This identity-in-Christ has profound implications for the church.

First, this teaches us that Christianity is not just a “me and Jesus thing.” If I am a believer then I am a member of the body of Christ (Romans 12:3–8) and must live out my Christian life in a covenantal, church context (Romans 12:9–21). It doesn't take long to realize that life in the church is not easy; other Christians are not always easy to get along with. In times of frustration I need to remember that I am not the sole possession of Christ. His blood has also graciously covered those who annoy, frustrate, injure, and sometimes hate me. As Paul says, “As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:13) precisely because he gave his life for *that* other sinner.

Second, regardless of our personal view of the church, “as far as *God* is concerned, nothing in the whole world is more precious than the church of Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup> If we could share God's perspective we

would stop grumbling about the church. We would, instead, have a much higher view of the church than we presently do. Yes, the church militant is fraught with wrinkles. But the church is Jesus' wife (Ephesians 5:25–33; Revelation 19:6–9). Imagine the audacity of openly criticizing and grumbling against the wife of one of your best friends. Unthinkable! Why is it that we are so free to grumble against the bride of Christ? Perhaps we forget the implications of our identity.

Third, the church owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to the Lord (Romans 8:12). Our obligation, not only as individuals, but as members of Christ's body working together, is to do whatever we can to glorify him. This urgent sense of gratitude should keep from neglecting to participate in service opportunities within the local body.

The glorious reality that the church belongs to Jesus Christ closely relates to the next principle that describes the identity of the church.

### **Christ is the Head of the Church**

Because the Lord Jesus Christ bought the church in his capacity as the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Timothy 2:5), it follows that he is the “head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18). The word “head” (*kephalē*) when used in a figurative sense refers to a position of authority.<sup>6</sup> The head on your body is the authority of the rest of the body. Decisions move from the head to the body; never the other way—at least they shouldn't. It would seem to be a given that every church agrees that Christ is the head of the church. But the reality is that some churches practically ascribe the headship of the visible church to a human prelate, whether pope, pastor, or board. This is why Reformed churches confessed so strongly that Jesus was the head of the church, not the Pope. At the beginning of the Reformation era, one of the earliest confessions of faith was “The Ten Theses of