

MESSIAH THE PRINCE,
Or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ.
By William Symington.
Sabbath Afternoon Studies: Part 14.

CHAPTER 7.
THE KINGLY OFFICE OF CHRIST IN
RELATION TO THE CHURCH.
(Continued.)

III. On the church, thus redeemed with his own blood, the divine Mediator has conferred a variety of most interesting and distinguishing properties.

It is a *spiritual* society; consisting of persons professedly separated from the world lying in wickedness, and called to the fellowship of God's own Son. Its head is spiritual: its ordinances and institutions bear a spiritual character: and the purposes for which it exists are altogether of this nature. It may be supposed that spirituality is a property, not so much of the visible as of the invisible church. This, however, is quite a mistake. Not that every one belonging to it possesses an essentially spiritual character; far from it: but every member professes that such is his character; and the character of any society, as distinguished from others, must be taken from its object and bearing, and from what those who compose it profess themselves to be. ► As distinguished, then, from civil society, the visible church is spiritual, men having no claim on the enjoyment of its privileges in virtue of their rights and relations as members of the civil community. The power possessed by its office-bearers is exclusively spiritual power; the object of their jurisdiction is the consciences of men, and not their persons or their property, which belong to the jurisdiction of the magistrate. It is, in this respect, a kingdom which is not of this world.

The church of Christ is strictly *independent*; meaning by this term to designate a feature of its character, and not the form of its government. It is independent alike of human wisdom, human power, and human control. The Lord Jesus Christ alone is its judge, lawgiver, and king. 'One is your master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. Call no man your father upon the earth; for one is your Father, which is in heaven.' [Matt. 23.8,9.] No earthly power—be it king, pope, or prelate—has a right to domineer over the church. It is composed of Christ's freemen, and is itself free from all outward control. The state may extend to it protection, and countenance, and pecuniary support, and friendly cooperation; but has no right to dictate its creed, to institute its laws, to appoint its ministers, or to interfere in any one way with either its constitution or its administration. Whether the civil power may and ought to form a friendly alliance with the church, is one thing; whether such an alliance is necessary to the church's

existence, is altogether another thing. The former does not, by any means, imply the latter. ► It may be the duty of the state to give the church all the advantages of a civil establishment, without such an establishment being essential to the church's existence. The church *has* existed without the countenance and support of the civil power. These are by no means necessary to its being. To maintain that they are, is pure and undisguised Erastianism;—a principle degrading to the honour of the church, and subversive of the very ends of its existence. Whatever may be said as to the duty of civil rulers, care must be taken to preserve sacred and untouched the blood-bought freedom and independence of Christ's covenant society. The highest and warmest patronage of the state is procured at too dear a price, if, in order to secure it, the church has to barter away the least portion of her liberties. Every attempt, then, to interfere with its independence, on the part of the civil power, must be regarded as an unhallowed invasion of the rights of the people, and a monstrous usurpation of the inalienable rights and prerogatives of the church's glorious Head. From such interferences have sprung some of the grossest corruptions and severest sufferings of the church; and they cannot be too jealously watched against, or too indignantly repelled.

Though independent of man, the church is *under subjection to Christ*. He is the Head of the body, the church. The doctrines which it is the duty of the church to believe and profess, are such as *he* taught. The ordinances to be observed are *his* institutions. The laws to be obeyed are *his* laws. The matter of faith; the form of worship; the line of conduct, are alike sanctioned by his authority. The ministers of religion, neither individually nor collectively, possess any legislative power. Their authority is wholly ministerial, and is subordinate to that of Christ. They are at best but servants, and whatever they do they are required to do in the name of their divine Lord and Master. Do they preach? Like Paul at Damascus, they must 'preach boldly in the name of Jesus.' Do they pray? They must do so, 'calling upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.' ► Do they baptize? Care must be taken that those to whom they administer the ordinance, like the Ephesians of old, be 'baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.' Do they inculcate duty? They must teach men to 'observe all things whatsoever Christ has commanded.' Do they exercise discipline? They must proceed on the principle laid down by the apostle,—'In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my Spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one to Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.'¹ To Christ, and to Christ alone, then, is the church in a state of subjection; and for the church to acknowledge any other authority were to act unfaithfully toward her Lord, as for any other to claim authority over her were daringly to invade the prerogatives of Jesus.

The church has received from the Mediator a character of visible *unity*. The spouse, the undefiled of Christ, is but one. The names by which it is designated carry in them the idea of unity. It is called a 'body;' a 'house,' or 'household;' a 'kingdom.' There may be many members in the body, but the body itself is one; there may be different individuals in the household, but the household itself is one; there may be many provinces and subjects in the

1 Acts 9.27; 1 Cor. 1.2; Acts 19.5; Matt. 28.20; 1 Cor. 5.4.

kingdom, but the kingdom itself is one. Hence, says the apostle, ‘There is one body and one spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. We, being many, are one bread and one body.’ [Eph. 4.4,5; 1 Cor. 10.17.]

The religion which is intrusted to the church being designed for mankind at large, in proportion as this religion is diffused there arises a necessity that those who embrace it should meet in separate congregations, and form particular associations. While they were so few that they could conveniently meet in one place, they did so. But this was not long; and the individual congregations or separate meetings which sprung out of the necessity of the case, were no violation of the church’s unity. It is important that all those individual churches which possess the marks formerly enumerated—doctrinal orthodoxy, a regular ministry, and the due administration of the ordinances of God’s worship—be regarded as so many integral parts of a great whole; as so many members of one body; as so many individuals constituting one grand society; and, so far as they have opportunities of meeting together, holding free and delightful fellowship with one another. ► Instead of indulging towards each other the jealousies of rivals, and each claiming for itself the exclusive name and privileges of *the church*, it becomes them to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Nor is it to be deemed enough, to effect this purpose, that there be a unity of interest in Christ the Head; and of love, and sympathy, and duty, among the members. The unity which depends on such grounds as these is invisible. The visible church must have a visible unity. This visible unity springs from its having one Head; from its making profession of a common faith; from its participating in the same ordinances of ecclesiastical fellowship; from its having one mode of conveying authority to its office-bearers; and from the nature of the government instituted for the preservation of its purity and peace. Let us illustrate these points a little.

The church must be one, as it has but one Head. ‘Christ is *the head of the church*.’ ‘He is *the head of the body*, the church.’ ‘There is *one Lord*.’ We nowhere read of *the heads of the churches*. It follows, either that each individual church has no head, or that the churches possess a character of visible unity under one common Head.

There is, besides, a common faith, by the profession of which the unity of the visible church is exhibited and preserved. There is ‘one faith.’ A profession of faith being a visible thing, is thus fitted to form a bond of visible unity. The doctrinal creed of all who belong to the visible church is substantially the same. A public acknowledgement of belief in the truths which compose the Christian system, not only constitutes the individual by whom it is made a member of the particular congregation with which he connects himself, but unites him with all throughout the world who hold the same sentiments. If he has been before a Pagan, or a Mahometan, or a Jew, the avowal in question, while it severs him distinctly from the community to which he formerly belonged, as surely connects him with that great community which is distinguished by the name of Christian.

The different societies of Christians are united in the participation of the same ordinances of ecclesiastical fellowship. There is ‘one baptism’ and ‘one bread.’ By being baptized with water in the name of Christ, a person is not merely admitted into the particular church from

which he receives the ordinance, but is proclaimed a member of that great society consisting of all who have had the same common badge of initiation put upon them. And, by joining in the Lord's supper in a particular church, the communicant holds fellowship with all who, in every place, by eating of the same bread and drinking of the same cup, unite in showing forth the Lord's death until he come. 'The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, being many, are one bread and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread.' [1 Cor. 10.16,17.]

The mode in which office-power in the church is conveyed, namely, by ordination, proceeds on the principle that the church is one. The call to exercise official authority proceeds from the people, but the power is uniformly represented in Scripture as proceeding from those by whom that power was formerly possessed. Election and ordination are not to be confounded with one another. Whatever may be the theoretical sentiments of some, all the leading denominations of professing Christians recognise this distinction, in practice at least. Without sympathizing at all with such as rigidly stickle for the necessity of apostolical succession to the validity of office in the church, it must be admitted that, in all ordinary cases, the right of ordination lies with those who have been previously ordained. This is the general rule, from which, however, there may be exceptions. If ordination expresses the conveying of official power and authority, it must proceed from office-bearers and not from the people, as the people cannot convey what they do not possess. ► In this way the *oneness* of the church, in all places and in all ages, is marked and kept up. The particular society over whom the person is ordained, thus declares itself one with those societies over whom the persons ordaining preside, and the act of ordination is regarded as so constituting, on the part of the person ordained, a relation to the whole visible church, as to give validity to his official ministrations in any part of the world. 'In the same manner,' says Principal Hill, 'as every one who is baptized, becomes a member of the catholic church, so every one who is ordained by the laying on of the hands of the office-bearers of the church, becomes a minister of the church universal. He is invested with that character in a manner the most agreeable to the example and the directions contained in the New Testament; and by this investiture he receives authority to perform all the acts belonging to the character. He cannot perform these acts to the church universal, because it is nowhere assembled; and the separation of the church universal renders it expedient, that the place in which he is to perform them shall be marked out to him. But this designation of place is merely a matter of order, which is not essential to his character, which does not detract from the powers implied in his character, and which serves no other purpose than to specify the bounds in which the church universal, by the hands of whose ministers he received the power, requires that the power shall be exercised.' ► 'By ordination,' says the same learned and perspicuous writer, 'they become ministers of the church universal; for having been tried by a particular branch of the church, acting in the name of Jesus, and in virtue of the trust derived from him, they receive authority and a commission to perform all the acts, which belong to those who are called in Scripture ambassadors, stewards, rulers, and overseers. . . . Whenever ordination is considered as the act

of Jesus Christ, by his office-bearers constituting a minister of the church universal, the idea of one great society is preserved. The whole may be diversified in outward circumstances, but it does not cease to be a whole; for, from this principle there result subordination to superiors, which is essential to church government, and a bond of union amongst those who are so far removed in place as not to be amenable to the same earthly superior.²

To these considerations, add the argument for its unity arising from the government of the church. If there were no bond of connexion among the individual congregations that exist, the government of each would of necessity be comprised within itself. In cases of controversy, there could be no constitutional means of settlement; and, in cases of injury or wrong, no legal mode of obtaining redress. To allay contention and restore peace it would often be necessary to resort to division. But the right of appeal, which at present we take for granted to be sanctioned by Scripture, obviates this difficulty and furnishes an evidence of visible unity. The party making the appeal, and the party to whom the appeal is made, mutually recognise each other as members of one body, in whose wisdom they can confide, and to whose decision they are willing to bow.³

Nearly allied to unity, and necessarily resulting from it, is another property of the church, namely, its *universality* or catholicity. By this we mean something different from what the church of Rome understands by the same term, when it puts forth the presumptuous and uncharitable claim to be regarded as the only visible church upon earth, into which all its inhabitants are bound to seek admission, and without the pale of which there is no salvation. We set up no claim of this kind in behalf of any one body of professing Christians, even the most pure. By the visible church being universal, we mean that it is not confined to any country, but, in the language of the Westminster divines, ‘consists of all those *throughout the world* that profess the true religion.’ It is not the church of England, nor the church of Scotland, nor the United Secession church,⁴ nor the Reformed Presbyterian church, any more than the church of Rome, which is entitled to lay claim to universality; but that great community, composed of all those who make a credible profession of true religion together with their children, which we have before described as constituting the visible church. ► Nor is this church called universal with reference to its actual diffusion, for it embraces but a small portion, comparatively, of the population of the globe, and there are even some regions where it is altogether unknown. But it is adapted to universal diffusion: its ministers are authorized, and even required to make known its doctrines and offer its privileges to men of every nation, kindred, and tongue: while the predictions of holy writ, and the grant made to Christ of the heathen for his inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession, hold out to us, not merely the encouraging hope, but the confident assurance, that his church shall yet

2 Hill’s Lectures, iii. 414-416.

3 Later editions of Dr. Symington’s book include a note here with a quotation from Dr. Hodge. But the reasoning of these paragraphs tends to establish a rationale for the organization of “sects” or denominations. This being an idea foreign to Dr. Symington’s discussion, it is here omitted.—JTK.

4 The name then borne by what is now the United Presbyterian Church. The Free Church was a name unknown until four years after the [original] publication of this work.

exhibit a character of actual universality;—that its light shall yet beam over all lands, and that all that dwell on the face of the wide earth shall unite in the belief of the same truth, the worship of the same God, the enjoyment of the same salvation, and the practice of the same holy obedience.

The visible church catholic possesses a duration commensurate with time. It is a *perpetual* society. It has existed, without intermission, from the period of its formation to the present hour, and shall continue to exist, without interruption, to the end of time. Different dispensations, indeed, there have been, but, under them all, the same church; nor was there ever an instant when its being was suspended. It existed from Adam to Moses, during the Patriarchal economy; and from Moses to Christ, during the Levitical economy; as from Christ to the end of the world it shall continue, during what is called the Christian economy. Nothing shall ever be able to effect a suspension, much less an annihilation of its existence. Christ has said, referring to himself, ‘Upon this rock will I build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ Not that the church may not degenerate. Both the purity of its doctrine, and the spirituality of its worship, may be greatly corrupted, and the number of its faithful adherents may be few. But it shall never become extinct. ► The Redeemer shall ever have a seed to serve him. ‘The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless there shall be always a church on earth to worship God according to his will.’ [WCF 25.5.] In the days of Elijah, when he thought himself alone, the Lord had reserved to himself seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. During the middle ages, when the horrid corruptions of Popery seemed to have obliterated every vestige of true religion, there were found among the valleys of Piedmont, in Bohemia, Switzerland, and even Britain, some who professed the pure gospel of the Son of God, and practised the simple rites of spiritual worship,—a few names who had not defiled themselves with the abominations of the mother of harlots. ► The existence of a visible church, since the era of the Reformation, cannot be called in question. Christ’s covenant society may yet have to encounter evil days; infidelity and heresy may yet attain an alarming degree of strength and prevalence; the witnesses for truth may yet be slain and lie for a while trampled upon in the streets: but the Lord shall never leave himself without a church; the Head shall never be without a body; and the slain witnesses shall be raised again to carry forward, with fresh vigour, the gracious designs of the Redeemer. The highest point to which the impetuous and over-flowing current of opposition can possibly rise, is to ‘reach even unto the neck.’ The floods of error and persecution can never reach the church’s Head: and while the head is above water the body is safe.

Discussion Questions: 1. Why should the Visible Church be considered a spiritual society? 2. In what sense is the church of Christ an independent institution? 3. In what is the Church’s subjection to Christ evident? 4. What metaphors or comparisons from Scripture serve to illustrate that *unity* is an essential character of the Church? 5. What do Dr. Symington and Principal Hill both regard as testifying to the unity of the Church of Christ throughout all her congregations in several nations and ages? 6. What last two characteristics of the Church of Christ are mentioned by Dr. Symington, and what statements of the Westminster Confession of Faith might be alluded to as expressing these.