

No.11, *The Promises Given to the Church by Christ*

Westminster Confession of Faith -- Ch. 25, Section 3 states: "*Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life to the end of the world; and doth by His presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.*"

In recent studies on this subject of *The Church* we have been noting that Christ as the sole King and Head of His Church has clothed her with authority in order to carry out her ministry on this earth. In part (a) of the statement quoted above from the Confession distinct reference is made to that authority and its purpose: Christ has given to the Church her ministry, the oracles of God, i.e., the Scriptures; and the ordinances of God, i.e., the sacraments, all for the purpose of the evangelising and edifying of His elect people, a work that He purposed to continue to the end of time. Moreover, in part (b) of the quotation from the Confession, reference is made to the fact that the Lord has given promise(s) to His Church concerning her ministry.

Christ gave the great and comprehensive promise that He would continue to build His Church, Matt 16: 18, the essence of which is repeated in Matt 28: 18-20. Here, Christ effectively reveals that the great work of gathering His elect will continue to the end of the age, which is synonymous with His declared promise in Matt 16: 18 that He would keep on building His Church. In addition, the same great assurance is given or implied at least in many other Scriptures, such as the passage read today in Eph 4.

However, as will be noted in both Matt 28: 19, 20 & Eph 4, Christ employs the instrumentality of the Church itself in order to accomplish His great goal of gathering in His elect, and, as noted, He has clothed her with authority in order to discharge her ministry. But, as noted also, He has given the Church certain promises with regard to the fulfilment of her ministry & task on this earth -- namely the promise of His presence and His Spirit.

Scriptures such as Matt 18: 20 & again Matt 28: 20 contain promise of Christ's perpetual presence with His people to the very end. Christ as the Godman in His glorified body is locally present in heaven where He will remain until His coming again, Acts 1: 11. However, as God and by virtue of His essential deity, He is, according to His promise, present in the midst of His Church at all times.

Then, He gave promise of the Spirit especially seen in John's Gospel, John 14: 16-18, 26; 15: 26, 27. The promise of the Spirit was given in relation to Christ's intimation that His physical presence was to be withdrawn. Note John 16: 7, 8 -- Christ intimates that His physical departure would result in the coming of the Comforter, with the result that the omnipresent Spirit is with the entire Church throughout the world at all times. Note Acts 9: 31 and note that all of these churches in these different areas enjoyed the consolation or comfort of the Holy Spirit.

THE ERROR OF ROMANISM CONCERNING THESE PROMISES

The Papacy professes to believe these promises, yet she introduces great error with respect to them. Rome alleges that these promises secure the extension of Christianity into one universal visible society. In addition, Rome also teaches that these promises give us the right to expect that this universally extended & visible society would continue to proclaim the whole truth of God without interruption & without any mixture of error. Moreover, in asserting that this was the sense of Christ's promise, Rome then asserts that the promise has only been realised in her communion, that is, within the see of Rome and in subjection to the Pope.

THE WICKED CONSEQUENCE OF ROME'S ERROR

By formulating this erroneous interpretation of Christ's promises of His & the Spirit's presence in & with the Church, Rome not only acclaims herself to be the one true & universal church, she also asserts that all other professing Christian churches are in error and that her's is the only valid ministry. In other words, with regard to ministry, Rome teaches that it is the Church that produces the ministry; and since, in her opinion, she is the true Church, she concludes that her priestly ministry is the only valid one. The outcome of this teaching is a priestly hierarchy that virtually takes the place of God and replaces the work of the Spirit through the Word with human channels through which, it is alleged, grace is dispensed to the people. Furthermore, Rome's teaching results in the charge that it was sin for the Reformers to separate from her and that the only recourse is to return to her fold.

Hence, Rome makes the church the means and the ministry the end. However, Protestantism rejects this teaching, rightly holding that the ministry Christ has given is the means by which the great end of the building of the Church is achieved. See Eph 4: 11 -- Christ has given the gift of ministry; and the purpose is the edifying of the Church, v.12. See also 1 Cor 12: 28 -- where Paul essentially declares that God has set ministry "in the Church." The inference is that the Church does **not** produce the ministry. Rather, God gives the ministry to His Church for her edification.

Moreover, Protestantism rightly teaches that the promise of Christ's presence and the Spirit's operation must be viewed in connection with the revealed purpose -- the establishing & preservation of the Church. The promises of constant presence & guidance secure *that* goal without doubt. However, to go beyond this understanding of Christ's promises and make them promises of a constant & error-free ministry is to read into the text that which is not there.

In addition, to accept Rome's gloss on Christ's promises leads to contradiction between various Scriptures. Christ Himself teaches clearly that the visible Church would become corrupt and would fall foul of terrible apostasy, Matt 24: 24, 25. The Apostles taught the same, 2 Thess 2: 3, 4; 1 Tim 3: 1-3 etc. The point is clear -- in revealing the promises of His presence and the Spirit's guidance, Christ certainly did not intend us to believe that such promises included the constant propagation of the faith "without any mixture of error." In addition, Church history shows that this corruption & apostasy did come as Christ had warned and that there never has been a situation such as Rome proclaims, i.e., a universal church uninterruptedly proclaiming the faith without error. Certainly, as far as Rome herself is concerned and her claims to be that one true universal church, no other section of the visible church has gone so far as she has in apostasy from truth -- to the point where, in the light of Scripture, she has forfeited the right to be recognised as a Christian church.

However, in conclusion, true believers are able to rejoice that as He promised, by His presence and His Spirit Christ continues to gather out His people; and will one day gather them all to glory.