

Informal Christianity

Refining Christ's Church

by

Phillip A. Ross



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*for the renewal, reformation, revival,
reconstruction, renovation, reclamation,
rehabilitation, resurgence, revitalization,
revivification, restoration, revitalization, and
regeneration of Christ's church*

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PRELUDE

This manuscript began in the year 2000, after I resigned as the pastor of Putnam Congregational Church. It is a work of frustration and disappointment with myself and with the institutional American church. It then sat in my computer for six or so years, only to be rediscovered and reedited for a wider audience. Will it be like a fine wine that improves with age and fermentation? I don't know. You will have to decide that. All I know is that I have endeavored to brew it using the recipe provided by Jesus Christ.

I am a profoundly ordinary person and have been, I think, a pretty ordinary pastor who has served some pretty ordinary churches over two decades. Consequently, the thoughts and reflections you will encounter in these pages are the result of my own frustration and disillusionment, my own ordinariness, the churches I have served, and the books I have read.

I think you will find that this is a challenging book, and if you are not personally challenged by it, then I have failed in my mission, even though my mission is not to write a challenging book. This book is not challenging because of any particular skill or ability I have, nor because I have seen something that isn't available to all Christians. Rather, it is challenging because Scripture itself is challenging, and where we as Christians fail to find the Good Book challenging to our own faithlessness we have failed to read it with "ears to hear" (Matthew 13:9). God is out, not merely to save His people, but to convict them (John 16:8). God's aim is your convic-

tion¹ in the fullness of all of the various meanings of that word. This is not a book for everybody, not even for every Christian. But it may be for you if you find that you can hear what it says. My prayer is that you will find it palatable.

HISTORIC TWO-CHURCH MODEL

The historic two-church model has been variously described as the Church Triumphant vs. the Church Militant, and the Visible vs. the Invisible Church. After some reflection I have come to see that my distinction between the informal and the formal church speaks to the same issue. These efforts, particularly the Reformed discussions about the Visible and the Invisible church, can be traced back to Paul's discussion in Romans 9:6 where Paul said that "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel."

The traditional Protestant understanding of this was that all who are members of a local church are considered to be a part of the visible church, whereas the invisible church refers to those who have actually been regenerated or quickened by the Holy Spirit, God's elect or true believers. The idea behind this is that some people on church rolls are not actively practicing Christians.

While there is good reason for making this distinction, it also creates some difficulties. The issue is that church membership cannot be considered to be synonymous with one's own claim of salvation. And if membership and claiming salvation are not necessarily the same (or linked), then questions arise about the role and function of church membership.

And with questions about membership come questions about the role and effectiveness of baptism, as well. Is it that some baptisms don't "take?" And if so, questions about the power and sovereignty of God arise. For instance, if someone is baptized but that baptism doesn't "take" (which means that the person falls away from faithfulness and from the church), does that mean that God has failed? Or that baptism (infant or adult, it doesn't matter here) failed to perform as promised? These are not small, unimportant issues but impinge upon the character of God and the reliability of Scripture.

1 The noun *conviction* has two senses: 1. strong belief (an unshakable belief in something); 2. judgment of conviction, sentence (a final judgment of one's guilt in a criminal case and the punishment that is imposed).

While I fully agree with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* on the essential distinction between the two churches (Chapter XXV, *Of the Church*), I find that the terms *visible* and *invisible*, which are not used in Scripture in this way, tend to move the discussion into ethereal and other worldly directions. They have, I think, given rise to much confusion about the issue, if only because it is difficult to discuss what is invisible. By definition it cannot be seen or discerned, whereas the discernment of actively practicing Christians is both possible and necessary.

Of course, such discernment cannot be done perfectly. Only God sees the heart. Nonetheless, church elders are required to make such distinctions regarding both church membership and church discipline. Elders need to know who is a member of Christ's church and who isn't. And as long as the criteria are invisible, the discernment will be impossible. In support of this concern, I simply note the sad condition of local church membership roles. I don't simply mean that membership lists are inaccurate, though they are. Rather, I mean that the biblical definition of church membership is itself unclear. It is unclear in the documents of the churches, in the eyes of the church leaders, and in the eyes of the watching world.

Membership is extended where it shouldn't be, and discipline is withheld where it shouldn't be. Indeed, church discipline has all but disappeared over the past century or so. And without discipline, membership is increasingly meaningless.

However, what I have called the two-church model in no way defects from the unity and/or oneness of Christ's church. Rather, this issue of Christian unity must be considered from a Trinitarian perspective, which will be addressed in various places in this book.

These are some of the issues I will here, and hope to demonstrate that the terms *informal* and *formal* move the discussion in a better, more concrete direction than the terms *invisible* and *visible*. Yet, these thoughts about the historic two-churches have come late in my Christian thinking. Only after having written these pages and thought about them for several years did the idea that they may parallel the concerns of the traditional ideas about the invisible and visible church become clear. I pray that what you will find in these pages will warrant some merit and further consideration.

Whatever credit for the meager glimpses of truth or nuggets of wisdom, if there are any that are actually worthwhile, accrues to the Lord and to His amazing grace and persistence in hammering me into a person of Christ. Thank you, Lord. By the same token, the responsibility for unnecessary offense, errors, and omissions accrues entirely to me. Lord, have mercy.

I pray that you will be blessed, that your vision will be refined, and your spirit edified as you peruse these pages. Don't be surprised if you find yourself disillusioned. I was/am. But neither be hesitant to dive in. I will attempt to explain the nature and necessity of personal, spiritual disillusionment in the text. It's unavoidable for God's people. It's part of our Christian sanctification, part of our growth in Christ because things are not what they seem to be. Rather, they are what the Lord tells us they are in Scripture. Seeing that is difficult. It takes some persistence and patience on our part to see it, as well as on God's part to pound it into our peevish brains. So be patient. And please be persistent, as well.

Thanks are due to several friends who have read the manuscript and provided corrections, questions, and suggestions. I am indebted not only for their time and thought given to this project, but for their genuine engagement of the ideas found here. Paul Williams (Marietta, Ohio) helped me see where more explanation was needed—though I know I haven't answer all of his questions to his satisfaction. Jim Lopreste (Belpre, Ohio) also indicated some areas that required further development. And Eric and Cathey Brown (Parkersburg, West Virginia) spent many hours editing. Thanks to all.

Thanks also to my faithful helpmeet, Stephanie, who shares and suffers my angst and the trouble it has brought.

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Marietta, Ohio
September 2007