

The Essential Church: An Introduction

Roger N. Wiles

“There shall always be a church on earth to worship God according to His will.” So states the Westminster Confession of Faith. This statement of belief begs the question – What is the Church of Jesus Christ? In other words, what is the essential Church?

There is a Church Triumphant in heaven (Rev. 7:9) and a Church Militant (Matt. 16:18) on earth. There is that invisible Church known only to God and a visible Church gathered in local congregations (Eph. 1:10, 22-23; I Cor. 1:2). Taken in part from “The Nature of the Church” by J. C. Ryle consider the following statements that begin to define the “essential” Church of the living God:

- The Church is composed of all believers in Jesus Christ; all of those elected by God the Father, sprinkled by the blood of God the Son, and sanctified by God the Holy Spirit are true members of Christ’s Church (See, I Pet. 1:2).
- The Church has members with the same marks; those who are born again of the Spirit; those with repentant hearts and faith towards God; those who strive to holiness of life and conversation; those who hate sin and love righteousness; those led by one Spirit; those built one foundation Jesus Christ (See, Jn. 3:7; Acts 20:21; I Pet. 1:16; Gal. 5:24; Eph. 4:4-7).
- The Church is dependent upon Christ alone for her existence. For there is only one great Head of the Church, one Shepherd and Bishop of souls, one Way, one Truth and one Life to govern, pastor and establish the Body of Christ (See, Jn. 14:6).
- The Church is named by God. Known as the Body of Christ, the household of faith, the family of God, the Church of the first born whose names are written in heaven, a royal priesthood and a holy nation; the Church is the purchased possession and habitation of God (See, Rev. 17:14).
- The Church possesses true unity in Christ and His Word. Christians are united in both the person and truth of God in Christ. It is the written Word that leads us to the living Word (See, Eph. 4:3-6).
- The Church possesses true holiness through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and the sanctification of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who believe. By positional perfection in Christ and by practical growing and grace in the knowledge of Christ the Church evidences in word and deed conformity to the image of Christ (See, Eph. 2:19-22).
- The Church is truly catholic found in every tribe, tongue, people and nation (See, Rev. 5:9).

- The Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets Jesus Christ himself the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).
- The Church will persevere to the end. Nothing can separate the Church from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. This Church persecuted, imprisoned, oppressed, beaten, beheaded and burned shall finish her mission on earth. Neither Pharoah, Herod nor Caesar could stamp out the out Church of God. “The Church is the anvil on which many a hammer is broken” J. C. Ryle (See, Rom. 8:37-39).
- The Church will never lose a member. The election of God the Father, the intercession and mediation of God the Son, and the renewing power of God the Holy Spirit guarantee those on the membership roles of heaven of eternal life (Jn. 6:37-40; 10:28-29).
- The Church will finish the work of Christ on earth. Even though often few in number armed with weapons that are not carnal the Church of the living God will preach, teach, baptize and disciple until “the kingdoms of this world are become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ” (See, Rev. 11:15).
- The Church will be perfect in heaven. When sin shall be no more and Christ presents His Bride to the Father without spot or blemish the Church will shine like the stars in the glory of her Savior (See, I Jn. 3:2).

This is just the beginning of what defines the “essential” Church. Pray for God to establish churches in our day committed to faith and worship according to the Word of God.