

The Counterfeit Church  
Revelation 17:1-6  
11/1/2015

Most of us have had the privilege of seeing a wedding, or being in one. The highlight of a wedding is the appearance of the bride. She always spends hours on her appearance to as to look absolutely as perfect as she can for her groom. Shimmering white, with a veil, and a gown that is stunningly beautiful. This is similar to what John would experience in chapter 21 of Revelation. He says that he “[S]aw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” That will be the most wonderful wedding of all time. In the meantime, however, we have a problem. There exists a counterfeit of the true bride of Christ. This counterfeit is stunningly beautiful also, at least at first glance. Actually, in her essence, she is quite ugly, but it takes some discernment to see it. The biggest problem is that this counterfeit is a very good counterfeit. It is not always easy to tell the difference between the real thing and the counterfeit. That is the whole point of a counterfeit: a counterfeit is something that tries to look like the real thing in order to deceive people. This counterfeit is very seductive. The question that our passage presents to us is a very blunt question: are we in danger of being seduced by this counterfeit?

The temptation would have been extremely attractive to John's first readers. Think about it: if they gave in to the temptation of this counterfeit, then they could fit into the world very comfortably. They wouldn't be persecuted. They would be the good ol' boys and girls. They wouldn't be those “judgmental party-poopers” who make it so bad that no one can have a good time. In this passage, we learn five things about this counterfeit church. In all five things, she is the counterfeit of the true church.

The first thing we learn about is her activity. All throughout the Bible, sexual immorality and idolatry are closely linked together. Adultery is often a metaphor for idolatry, as we see in the case of Hosea and his adulterous wife Gomer. The true church is the bride of Christ, and thus has the closest possible intimacy with Jesus Christ. And by that closest possible intimacy, the church has many children. They are the children of God. The prostitute, however, has many adulterous relationships with the gods of the nations, and

thus produces many illegitimate offspring. The prostitute and the bride both have lots of children. The difference is that the church has them legitimately, while the prostitute has them illegitimately.

Of course, the most common idol that the prostitute worships is money. In verse 4, we can see her wealth displayed for all to see, with lots of gold and jewels. If you see a church that worships money, and does not see it as a tool to be used for the glory of God and the furtherance of God's kingdom, then you are probably looking at the counterfeit church, not the real church. At the very least, it would be a church that is flirting with the prostitute.

The second thing we see is her habitat, the place where she lives. It is not the place we might expect. We expect prostitutes to be in cities. That is not where this one lives. This prostitute lives in the wilderness, in the desert. The wilderness has a double meaning. On the one hand, it is the place where Adam and Eve went after the Fall. It is the opposite of the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden was fruitful. The wilderness is barren. The Garden of Eden had much water. The wilderness has almost no water. The second meaning that the wilderness has is the place where the true church lives in between the first and second coming of Christ. It is where Israel went after the Exodus. So, in this respect, again, we can see just how closely the prostitute tries to mimic the church. So, how do we tell the difference between the prostitute and the real church? The true bride and the prostitute might both be in the wilderness. The difference, however, can only be seen by faith. The true bride is in heaven, spiritually speaking, even if it is physically located in the wilderness. That is the point of Revelation 21: the true bride comes down out of heaven on the last day. Only by faith can we see which is the true church, and which is the counterfeit.

The third characteristic of the prostitute is her sovereignty. Notice that she is sitting on the beast of chapter 13, the one with seven heads and ten horns. The act of sitting usually means a sovereign rule of some sort. In this respect, the counterfeit looks like the true church. For the true church also has power of a kind: it has a spiritual power. The prostitute, however, is tied to a political power that the church is never to have. The prostitute's power is dark, and is plainly used for evil. Verse 6 shows us that the prostitute kills the children of the true bride, and drinks their blood. It is exceedingly important to recognize how close the connection is between the prostitute

and the beast. Just as there is the true Triune God Who provides the foundation on which the true church can rest, so also there is a false trinity (the dragon and the two beasts of chapters 12-13) which provides the foundation for the false church. The difference between the counterfeit church and the true church is a bit easier to spot here: the counterfeit church eats the people of God, whereas the true church nurtures the people of God.

The fourth characteristic of the counterfeit church is her appearance. She is richly beautiful, although only on the outside. The beauty is only skin-deep, as the saying goes. Now, she looks amazing on the outside. Only rich people dressed in purple and scarlet. In fact, purple was the color of royalty in those days. It was the color that the emperor wore. This is probably not a coincidence. She has gold, jewels, and pearls. She has a golden cup. Of course, what is in the cup is absolutely filthy. Abominations, sexual immorality, idolatry, and the blood of the saints make up this highly intoxicating, but also incredibly foul drink. The true church is also beautifully dressed, although not nearly as gaudy. The true bride of Christ wears white, the wedding dress. In the Bible, the white dress is usually a symbol of purity and righteousness. We can see here a connection to the righteousness of Christ, which clothes the bride of Christ in spotless white.

The fifth and last characteristic of the prostitute is her name. The name is “Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots, and of the abominations of the earth.” This title is a little difficult, but if we take it a bit at a time, it can become clear what John is talking about. The term “mystery” does not mean what we normally think of when we hear the word “mystery.” We usually think of a detective story. We think of something mysterious. The Bible means something else by the term “mystery.” The Bible uses the term to refer to something that was hidden, but has now been revealed. In other words, when the Bible uses the term, it does not mean something mysterious in and of itself. It just means something that you haven't found out about yet, because God hasn't revealed it yet. Well, in verse 5, then, the name of the prostitute is revealed. It was not revealed before, but now we see her name. It is Babylon the Great. Babylon, of course, was the world power that over-ran Judah during the time of the Exile in 586 B.C. Babylon represented world power, luxury, riches, and lots and lots of idolatry. Almost certainly, John had in mind the current ruling power of the world, which was Rome, as we will see next week. However, John

doesn't have just Rome in mind. This prostitute is a much bigger idea than Rome. Rome was merely the latest appearance of this prostitute.

In reality, this prostitute represents Satan's kingdom, especially in terms of its seductive appeal. This chapter is, as one commentator noted, a tale of two cities. Only the cities are not Paris and London, as is the case in the novel by Charles Dickens. Rather, it is a tale of the two cities that Augustine talked about in his magnificent work *The City of God*.

The true church also has a name on her forehead, but it is the name of Jesus Christ, as we see in chapter 22:4, where the name of Jesus is written on the foreheads of all of God's servants. So, in every single one of these five characteristics, the counterfeit church tries to look like the true church, but doesn't quite succeed. It can sometimes be difficult to tell them apart, but that is one of the great commands that John gives to us: we must learn to tell apart the true church from the counterfeit church. How do we do that? How do we tell them apart?

The Reformation identified three marks of the true church. The Word of God faithfully preached, the sacraments faithfully administered, and church discipline properly carried out. They recognized that no church does all three things perfectly. In other words, there are churches that are more pure, and there are churches that are less pure. But these are still the marks of the true church. So, while the false church is getting drunk on the blood of the saints, as well as all the abominations of idolatry and sexual immorality, the true church is getting fed on the Word and the Sacraments.

Let's make this concrete. I have actually heard that some bodies that are called churches are having women's "Bible studies" that are based on the series of novels called "50 Shades of Gray." I have not read the novels, but I have seen enough reviews and such to know that these novels are completely pornographic in nature. At best, a church that allowed this to happen cannot tell the difference between the prostitute and the true church. At worst, that church is part of the prostitute itself.

So we must learn to tell the difference so that we will be joined to the true church. Folks, there are many churches out there that claim to be part of the true church. We must avoid two extremes. The more dangerous extreme right now is the idea that all denominations are equally part of the true church. There are some that have apostatized so much that they condemn the truth. The Roman Catholic Church is one such church. They condemn to

Hell anyone who believes in justification by faith alone. Just because a denomination calls itself a church doesn't make it a church. The Mormons call themselves a church as well, but they are occult. They are no part of the true church. They have even less claim to be part of the true church than the Roman Catholic Church does, because the Mormons deny the deity of Jesus Christ, and they deny the Trinity, two things that Rome has always believed.

However, there is an opposite extreme to avoid. We can sometimes get so concerned about who is in and who is out of the true church, that we develop an overly suspicious attitude. The old quip is sometimes true: "The true church is only you and me, and I'm starting to have doubts about you." That's how some people think. No doubt they believe that Jesus is so lucky to have them in the church.

If we can tell the difference, then we will be able to join the true church. This is the vital point. The true church is the bride of Christ. To join that true church is to enjoy the marriage relationship that the church has with her groom, the Lord Jesus.

If we recognize the true church, then we will also be able to join the right church for the right reasons. I constantly hear of people joining churches for the wrong reasons. They might be looking for the right youth group program, or the right kind of music that suits their taste, or they're looking for a certain atmosphere. The thing that should determine our search for the right church is the three marks of the church. We should be looking for a church that has the true preaching of the Word, the true administration of the sacraments, and the church that exercises church discipline. That should be our criteria, and nothing else. If you have a choice between churches that have all three of those things, only then should you allow lesser concerns to enter the picture.

Lastly, for what are we living? Which woman has us enthralled? The prostitute or the bride of Christ? The prostitute is very seductive. But the pleasures are short-lived. It's the eternity of pain and suffering in Hell that should really give us pause to consider whether we really want to go that route. Living for the true church is really a very similar thing to saying that we are living for Christ. For how can we really love Jesus without also loving the bride of Christ for whom He died? Join the bride, and not the prostitute.