

THE REAL CHURCH¹

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THE word "Church" has in our day again become more significant and more powerful. In 1926 Otto Dibelius, then General Superintendent and now Bishop of Berlin, published a book under the title *The Church's Century*. By that was meant our twentieth century. The author was surely right in maintaining that the Church has been more talked about during the three decades since the First World War, which we have behind us, than in the whole of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries put together. Who would have dreamt about 1910, when the writings of Hermann Kutter were at their height, that this could happen? Perhaps this has something to do with the almost complete collapse of the political, economic and cultural shape of the old Europe, which began with the First World War and with which the question is closely related: whether it may not once again be given to the Church to save this old Europe, perhaps in a new form, as she helped to found it? In this respect the Roman Catholic Church seems to be in very good spirits and to raise many open and secret expectations. Her greatly improved position and her vigorous pushing forward in certain places is also a sign that the word "Church", even outside of her particular folds, has again come to the forefront of Christian consciousness and theological discussion. For it is undoubtedly part of her strength that she knows much better than anyone else how to give the impression that one is dealing with the Real Church when dealing with her. During the great crisis 1933-45, however, it was nevertheless true that there was in the Evangelical Churches, first in Germany, then in Holland and Norway, as well as in other countries, "demonstration of the Spirit and of power". This was neither to be overestimated nor underestimated, but was really rather unexpected everywhere. From it more than one inside and outside of this Church could see that the dissolution of the

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Evangelical Church was not as far advanced as one might on occasion have previously supposed. From a totally different side the idea is thus once again forced upon us that for nearly a quarter of a century we have had an ecumenical movement in which the weak Churches are encouraged to have more confidence in their own affairs through contact with really, or allegedly stronger, and in any case more self-conscious Churches. And finally it may well be that the abandonment by evangelical theology, at least in certain quarters, of the traditional liberalism and individualism of the eighteenth and nineteenth century fathers has helped to bring about a new understanding for the *communio sanctorum* and to turn the thoughts of many in this direction, in spite of the diverse way in which it brought about this change.

Now the more the Church is talked about to-day, the more necessary it is, if we are not to waste our time, for us to give an explanation of what the word and the concept really mean and denote. What really is the Church? What is the Real Church? That is the question which we should try to answer as simply and as centrally as possible.

I

The Real Church becomes visible because the power of the Holy Spirit enables her to step out of and shine through her hiddenness in ecclesiastical establishment, tradition and custom.

We begin with the question: How and where is the Real Church to be seen? According to the third article of the ancient creed, she belongs to those realities in which we Christians must believe. There it is laid down that we Christians actually see the Real Church, but only because we are able to do so through faith, not as one sees a state, in its citizens and authorities, laws and institutions. What one sees in faith one sees in the event of its revelation, as the object of faith steps out and shines forth. The believer has no power over it, and the only part he can have is that which is given to him. The Real Church is truly not invisible, but visible. She is, however, visible at that point, and only there, where she is made visible by an act of God and the witness of the Holy Ghost. In this visibleness she will be seen in faith. That which is seen in the same place without

faith and therefore without the actual revelation and witness is not the Real Church. One can, of course, see her as a religious community in the same way as one can see a state; but then one only sees Church members and Church authorities, Church orders and Church constitutions, Church buildings and also Church history, Bible, dogma and ritual, Church-goers and clergy in their various activities, etc. One sees an image, an appearance of the Church. One sees something which everywhere and under all sorts of titles claims to be the Church. Obviously one need not have faith to see this. One sees the Real Church, however, because she, as the original of the image, the reality of the appearance, steps out into the arena and speaks for herself. She does this unambiguously. Then she is to be seen. Just there where one had previously seen that image, that appearance, one now sees the Real Church. As the dark letters of illumination advertisements are made visible, readable and audible by turning on the electric current. One believes in something which one considers to be the Church, in a holy universal Church, as one believes in the Holy Ghost and therefore in God. For it is in fact not the Church who adds this visibility to her reality, but God, whose pleasure it has become to grant her such visibility. Who does not think at first and indeed often of that image, that appearance, whenever one says "Church"? Unfortunately one seldom believes what he says, especially when he says this word. It is good to convince oneself that he is not then thinking of the Real Church. We can think of the Real Church then, and only then, when God pities us, when He acknowledges that image and appearance, and there with us also, and, through faith in Him, allows us to believe in and to see the Real Church just there, where we only saw the image and the appearance.

II

The Real Church therefore will always and everywhere be visible only to very few, the very terrified and very joyful among "Christians", and to these only through God's free grace.

What has been said up to now should be a warning. The situation is such to-day that the Church is once again spoken of too lightly, too quickly, too confidently and too directly, as

if—perhaps because of better exegesis and doctrinal theology we have realised that there is such a thing—she were there and to be seen and as if all her authority and spiritual treasures were at the disposal of us Christians. I think of many among our younger theologians, who, because they were not present, no longer remember the departure out of Egypt and the crossing of the Jordan, and who now find it hard to understand that the way from seeing to believing is a way to seeing anew, and that to tread it, or rather to be led along it, does not follow as a matter of course. The image of the Church is still only an image and her appearance still only an appearance if the mercy of God does not intervene and allow us to see the Real Church. One can speak very weightily, very solemnly, very ecclesiastically, and certainly very impressively and grippingly about the Church, and yet quite inanely, if, in doing so, one only in fact thinks of that image and that appearance, if faith and its vision do not intervene, if the subject “Church”, which is of supreme worth, in fact only refers to something which all the world can see, if the worth of the Church does not spring from faith. It cannot then be worthy of faith and cannot inspire any. Here we must be warned against results which are easy to obtain, but which have no duration.

The warning must be underlined. As surely as they depend on the Revelation of God and the witness of the Holy Ghost, the faith and therefore the vision of the Real Church are not for everybody. Here also many are called but few are chosen. One can put this to the test of fact: the Real Church is the lowest, the poorest, the most insignificant, the most helpless thing under God’s heaven, as surely as it is centred on a manger and a cross. Who is now startled at this fact when he says “Church”? Who now thinks of the deep shame he takes upon himself when he becomes a member of the Church? If he were to see the Real Church, how terrified he would be! And the Real Church is the highest, the richest, the brightest and the most powerful thing under God’s heaven, just as surely as He, who was born in a manger and crucified on Golgotha, rose from the dead and sits as ruler at the right hand of God. Who now rejoices, who now really rejoices over this fact when he says “Church”? Who now really thinks of the unique honour that is done him in that he may become a member of the

Church? If he were to see the Real Church, with what joy he would rejoice! There are certainly enough timid Church members and certainly enough who are over confident. But where are those who are very terrified and, at the same time, very joyful, who, even as such, could prove that they knew the Real Church? "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18.8). Is it not true that those who know the Real Church will never be in the majority, but always in the minority? Let us understand it rightly: the offer and the call are for all. Who cannot and may not see the Real Church? But the mystery of free grace and the mystery of free faith stand in the midst to judge and examine, even in the midst of those who seriously want to be Christians. When one knows this, one will avoid rash conclusions and cocksure talk about this matter because one can only speak of the Real Church in fear and trembling—only in very great fear and very great joy.

III

The Real Church lives as the community of her Lord, that is, as the congregation of lost sinners called together by Him through the comfort and exhortation of the Biblical witness to the reconciliation of the world with God which has taken place in Him.

We seek now a first answer to the decisive question: How and from what and for what does the Real Church live? In doing so we look at her establishment by her Lord Jesus Christ and answer as follows.

1. She exists as a community, bound to Him and not to be separated from Him. She exists in such a way with Him and from Him that He always goes before, she always follows after—He always above, she always below—He always speaks, she always only answers. She belongs not to herself but Him. She lives not from and for herself, but because He lives, He, the Head, she the body in His members. She knows no wisdom, no holiness, no power and glory apart from those which are in Him. She does not want to exist apart from Him, and if she did she could not. The Real Church is so lowly, that all she has she has only in Him.

2. The Real Church lives as the assembly which is called together by Him. No one belongs to her as a result of birth or

descent, no one by virtue of the fact that he is a member of a Christian family or Christian people, no one by virtue of something that others have done for him, but also no one because of his own decision and attachment, no one because of his religious experiences or any other inward change. The Real Church is the assembly which is called, united, held together and governed by the Word of her Lord, or she is not the Real Church. A commander calls his officers and non-commissioned officers together at the front in order to give them definite information and instructions. So, in this receiving of information and orders, the Real Church lives. In this way and in no other.

3. But the members of the Real Church are not just "officers". Those who are assembled in her are lost sinners and therefore neither religious virtuosos nor moral paragons. Where the Church is portrayed as the "good society", there she is certainly not the Real Church. What distinguishes her members from others can only be that, among themselves, they know, admit and recognise that we human beings as a whole are not "good society", but are "by nature inclined to hate God and our neighbours". Righteous? Yes, in that they know that they have no other alternative but to admit that God is right and that they are wrong. "Better?" Yes, in so far as they know better than others how much we human beings continually become guilty before God and before one another.

4. The Real Church lives therefore as if she were continually being supported and carried over an abyss. Where she knows how to comfort and encourage herself, there she is certainly not the Real Church. The Real Church lives on the comfort and exhortation which she may receive in spite of the human foolishness and perversity in which she also takes part. She lives, that is to say, in the strange, transcendent power of her Lord. She lives because she allows herself to be shamed by His goodness. She lives because her religiosity and wonted piety, her ordinary and extraordinary solemnity must be repeatedly reduced to dust and ashes in the fire of His Word and Spirit. She lives because of the mercy that is shown her. If only for this reason she will not grow weary. The unreal Church on the other hand is always weary, because she will not allow herself to be shamed, to be burned, and to have mercy shown

her. How much better even now she could be as the Real Church!

5. The new, the strange comfort and the transcendent exhortation which the Real Church receives and from which she may then live are, however, entirely the comfort and exhortation of the Biblical witness. She lives not from two or three or many sources, but from this and this alone. Why only from this? Because, of all the places which can be considered, only in this will an answer be found to the question which can move the Real Church. The question is: What will become of us who are all such evil doers against God and our neighbours? From the answer to this question come Moses and the Prophets, John the Baptist, the Evangelists and the Apostles. Other questions have many answers. But this is the question of the Real Church. It is not obstinacy or narrow-mindedness, but pure objectivity when she adheres to the Scripture, which is holy, because it is written for unholy people. It bears witness of Life, which has appeared and which is promised to all the unholy.

6. This is, however, the Life from which the Real Church may continually live: the reconciliation of the world with God that has taken place in Jesus Christ, the covenant of grace established in Him between Himself and lost sinners. It is the law of the Gospel, the law of the Spirit of Life to which the Real Church is subjected and which she cannot throw off, and which she cannot praise enough; she may believe, she is under orders to believe that God, in great wrath against all our human unfaithfulness, was faithful, is faithful and remains faithful, and, in that He has given Himself in His Son and thereby restored again His offended right and our lost human right, and so established an eternal peace. No man has ever lived at any time or in any situation, for whom this did not happen and for whom it is not valid. What is the solidarity of human guilt compared with the solidarity into which all men are transplanted through God's grace? The latter must be known if we are willingly to admit the first also. The Real Church is the Assembly of men who through God's grace may know of God's grace for all, who as first-fruits of the whole creation may know the Lord of the world, who is also Lord of that covenant, as their Lord. The Real Church lives in this knowledge.

IV

The Real Church lives in the mutual relationship of the comforted and the exhorted on the ground of their common relationship to the Son of God, who, for all men, was born as man, was crucified and rose again.

As we essay a second answer, we take, as it were, a horizontal view and say: the Real Church lives in an absolute solidarity, an unconditional association of her members among one another.

There are also other human associations. That there are families, peoples and classes, that there are all sorts of communities of interests, action and conviction is true, right and necessary. They are, however, not to be compared with the association which is in the Real Church. They are quite conditional associations, that is to say they embrace human beings only in part, only at certain points of their existence, not in their existence as such. That is why they overlap one another. That is why family can be against family, people against people, class against class, this community of interests, action and conviction against its corresponding community; that is why the community of class can be against that of the people and vice versa, the community of conviction against the community of interests and vice versa. As people are gathered into the Real Church they will be called out of, fetched out of, all these conditional associations or solidarity—first of all, we know, from the family. Not that the Real Church is against these other associations. She does not, however, coincide with any of them. She stands above them all. Nor does she take any part in their overlapping and opposition. She stands for unconditional human solidarity. She is solidarity in human existence before God and neighbour. That her members are called out of, fetched out of, the other solidarity means that they are called into, fetched into the true and the real solidarity.

In the Real Church men know each other. Each knows the other for what he really is, a lost sinner, who cannot help himself, one of the comforted and exhorted of Jesus Christ, who is helped as such. Just this, according to the Gospel, is the existence of men, in which, in spite of all other differences, they are relatives, brothers and sisters. In the Real Church they know one another in their human existence, and therefore as brother

and sister. In the Real Church they may and therefore must have ultimate, natural and radical confidence in one another—otherwise they are not in the Real Church. Why? Because a man sees his own nature there in that of the other, and the other immediately recognises his own nature in him, because the least estrangement, the least fear of one another is thereby necessarily excluded.

In the Real Church men love each other. In the Real Church love means neither esteem nor admiration nor veneration. Here love means simply this: that one wants and approves the other in his station and nature exactly as he is, and without this wanting approval on the part of the other, and without the other's existence in his station and nature, he himself does not want to be. One cannot see how men may come really to love one another where they know nothing of God's judgment and grace and of that solidarity of all men. On the other hand again one cannot see how men can help but love one another when they see before them this foundation of human existence, and that means in the Real Church. Since Christian love has this root, one need definitely have no worries about the necessary reservations which one owes to the truth, to the other and also to oneself. On the contrary, since Christian love has this root, it is impossible for men to oppose one another with final reservations in the Real Church.

In the Real Church men help each other. Not in the way that God helps His creatures, but in the way that men can help one another. They help one another not with the intention of doing good, not to prove that they are unselfish people (which we certainly are not), not to please God and to make an impression on the public with the offering we bring (a superfluous undertaking as the offering that counts, has been made for us long ago), but because in the Real Church they have something in common in which everyone can share. In the Real Church men help each other in the most realistic way, for together they engage in a common task and come under a common command, so that without any qualms they are invited to stand in for one another and bear one another's burdens.

We are not talking about striving towards an ideal. We are not talking of any other law than the law of Jesus Christ. That they know, love and help one another in the Real Church is

life from the Gospel, life in the universal and in the Real Church of all who universally acknowledge solidarity in the Word of God, who has become flesh for us. Christians do nothing special; they are under no fixed rule when they associate with each other a little differently than is usual among other people. They may, however, allow their "moderation" to be made known to all men (Phil. 4.5). Even in this they only represent and speak for all others in anticipation for they do not yet know, have not yet heard, cannot grasp and understand that the reconciliation of the world with God also takes place for them, the ordinance of life which has its root in this event is also in force for them. They cannot live it yet. Or can they, do they nevertheless do it occasionally, and perhaps occasionally to the shame of Christians? One can say bad things about certain children of this world, but one cannot possibly deny that, among themselves at any rate, they are better comrades than the majority of the members of most of the clerical associations in the world. Perhaps that happens as a token of fact that that ordinance of life in which the reconciliation took place for all whether known or unknown, actually is in force for all. Perhaps also to reveal the fact that for Christians the Real Church is often apt to get lost.

V

The Real Church lives in the Communion of the Holy Ghost, that is, from the knowledge that the Kingdom of God has come, in prayer for the revelation of His glory and therefore lives for the commission to tell all men that God was, is and always will be for them.

We essay a third answer to the question as to the life of the Real Church in that we look to the event, the act and the history which are consummated in what the New Testament calls the "Communion of the Holy Ghost". Its relationship to the fellowship of Christians with one another is that of the vertical to the horizontal.

The Real Church lives because God, who was in Christ, because Christ at the right hand of God, does not cease to live for us. She lives because it is not enough that God is in heaven and man on earth, and also because it is not enough that He has, once and for all, done what had to be done for the good

of man on earth. The Church lives because something new happens every day from God's eternal throne. She lives because, day by day, she may see, hear and receive this new thing.

She lives in ever new knowledge of what God, in Jesus Christ, has done for us men. How can she ever be finished with the contemplation and comprehension of the depth, height and breadth of God's perfect work? What generation can here do more than begin in its own way at the beginning? Immanuel, "God with us": the little child can grasp it and the old man need not hesitate to admit that he is far from grasping it, because from there ever new dimensions and aspects appear on all sides, ever new light shines there, ever new growth in knowledge is possible and is offered. The Real Church lives in this growing knowledge.

And she lives in ever new prayer for all this, even for the revealing of Jesus Christ as Lord that surpasses all Christian knowledge, and for the ultimate vision of His glory. And yet the Real Church still stands with the whole world in the midst of so much temptation and weakness, so much affliction and distress, so much frustration and error. Furthermore the people who see a great light are still the people who also walk in darkness. Therefore as yet we can only pray that what God has perfected in men, in the whole creation and in the Real Church, will take shape. The Real Church distinguishes herself from the mere image and appearance of a Church in that she continually breaks through to this prayer, in that she leaves behind all self-sufficiency and self-satisfaction, and also all brooding and despair over the special problems of the actual present, and breathes: "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done!" or to sum up: "Amen, yes, come, Lord Jesus!" and this groaning, as Luther once described it, because it is the groaning of the Holy Ghost Himself, will become a shout that goes through the whole heaven: so loud that all angels hearken for a louder note than this they never thought to hear.

And so in ever new knowledge and prayer the Real Church now lives in ever new movement. Even the Real Church is not an end in herself, but she ministers: namely, God to all men. Even when she withdraws within herself that can and will only be as a preparation for a speedy and more powerful return to

the external world. When those officers and non-commissioned officers have received their instructions, then they return to the troops—that was the only reason why they were summoned—then the orders will be passed on. “For God so loved”, not Christians but “the world”. “I am the light of the world”, said the Lord and, in that He gave Himself, He passed it on to His disciples: “Ye are the light of the world”. What it does not know it will be told and shown through the Real Church. Now that does not mean that it is her task to reprimand the whole or indeed half the world. If she were to behave like the accuser of her brothers and sisters then she would certainly be in the service of a quite different master. Her task is not to say *No*, but *Yes*: the mighty *Yes* to God, who, because there are godless men, has, for His part, never thought and never thinks of being a “manless” God—and the powerful *Yes* to man for whom, behave himself as he will, Jesus Christ died and rose again. Of what use would be the Church’s preaching, her instruction, her diaconate, her theology, her political watch, her mission—how would she overcome unbelief in her own message, if she did not deliver this ruthlessly in its wholeness to all people: that God is not against, but for mankind? She need not worry if that necessary *No* to human arrogance and human slothfulness does not thereby come to its own. This necessary *No* will become audible enough if she, as Real Church, occupies herself with—washing of feet and with nothing else. This is the obedience which she owes to her Lord in the world, this is the thing which is worth all her burning zeal, this the movement which she will consummate again and again. Because this movement, together with that of knowledge and prayer, is ever newly consummated, the Real Church lives, really from above downwards, really involved in the Communion of the Holy Ghost. If she did not live in this renewal how could she be more than an image and appearance of a Church, how could she be the Real Church?

VI

The Real Church lives under the ordinance and government which her Lord Himself carries out in that He bestows on the community gathered in His name the gifts which are necessary for the performance of her ministry.

We essay now yet a fourth and last answer to our question and say: the Real Church lives in such a way that she is governed by her Lord Himself and by Him alone.

She does not, therefore, live according to her own discretion; nor at her own responsibility and risk. If at any time she has, in obedience tried to think, to speak, to act, then she will not regard herself as being eternally, infallibly and unshakably bound to any of her measures and decisions, to any of her own traditions and customs, not even to any of her recent resolutions; rather will she hold herself in immediate readiness to receive new instructions. That applies to her preaching and divine services, her theology and her theoretical and practical canonical law. What we men regard, conceive and devise as true and right in the life of the Church, over which we have agreed according to our highest wisdom and conscience, and perhaps have already agreed for centuries, may, as a result of our efforts and the efforts of our fathers, possibly have its serious import by way of anticipation and in pointing the way; but it cannot and dare not become the governing power in the Church. That would mean that we or our fathers had made ourselves lords of the Church, and had at the same time become the slaves of an ecclesiastical democracy which, because it is ecclesiastical, has not in the slightest a higher claim on our souls than any other democracy. Here we find ourselves at the point where the image and appearance of a Church on the one hand, and the Real Church on the other, part company in a particularly significant way.

It is granted to the Lord of the Church to govern her Himself and alone. In that He has testified of Himself to the Prophets and Apostles, in that the Real Church listens to her testimony, her Holy Scripture, provision has been made for Him to speak to her time and again and for her to distinguish time and again between His voice and the voice of other lords. All that is necessary for Him really to carry out His government is nothing else than this, that His Church really be and remain the Church which hears and proclaims Him in preaching, baptism and the Lord's Supper. He is then in the midst of her, He is then among us indeed with His Spirit and gifts.

It is thus through His spiritual gifts that He governs the Real Church, makes her capable, willing and ready for the

ordinary fulfilment of her duties, the many duties, which, having regard to the various people, circumstances and times, are necessary for the fulfilment of her one duty. We read in Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12 of the diversity of these gifts, and suppose that this diversity can indeed be endless. The Real Church is not afraid of these riches. One may well ask whether the reason why the gifts of the Spirit among us are so few, and why there is so much mutual distrust among the bearers of the gifts, which we perhaps have—as between the teachers and the pastors, between the prophets and those gifted to be deacons and those called to leadership—is not because we all want to build the Church according to our own wisdom, because we quench the Spirit and are, to this extent, not the Real Church at all. What comes from ourselves, even in the Church, will be incomplete, paltry and therefore unacceptable. That is, it will mean the dividing and breaking up of the Church. As surely as they come from one Lord, the gifts of the Spirit will not break up the Church, but will govern and set her in order. One must not, however, fear them, nor want to protect oneself against them by a barricade of man's work. One may not say gift and mean one's own ability, say duty and mean office, say creed and mean confession, say prayer and mean rite, say ordinance and mean regulation, say Christ and mean the fathers or still simpler, oneself, and whatever all this *quid pro quo* may be called. The doors must always and everywhere be kept open for the Lord. The Real Church is free in that she trusts in the Spirit, i.e. in the Spirit of the Word of her Lord, confident that He will certainly lead her into all truth. And so she is also bound in that she cannot rely on any other leadership than this, not on her tradition, or any kind of inspiration, not on hierarchy, and so also not on the more or less overwhelming experiences that one may boast of in her midst. The best that can be said in this respect, however, is this: that time and again it has pleased the Lord, and was possible, to come to His own even through closed doors, and out of a mere image and appearance of a Church to create the Real Church, i.e. the Church governed by Him and the gifts of His Spirit.

VII

This Real Church is the one, the holy, the universal, the apostolic

Church which we are invited to acknowledge and so become her living members because Jesus Christ calls us to follow Him.

We close with the question: How does one come to the Real Church, to participate in her life? That happens once one is given really to see her under this or that aspect or to hear from her, and does not close one's eyes and ears, does not stand on ceremony, does not say Yes—but. Few see her. Many could and are allowed to see her. Why is it that only so few see her? Because between her and us stands a whole wall of pious and impious human obstinacy, of new and old human cleverness and dullness. Why do we not break through this wall? Why do we not leap over it with God? And why do we ask: how then can the Real Church become real for us? Because somewhere in the depth of our being we are agreed that we will not break through or leap over—even if an angel from heaven were to invite us to do so.

But our last word should not be an accusation. All are doubtless called to the Real Church, which lives from her source in Jesus Christ, from whom the call ever goes out into the image and appearance of the Church, the call which is powerful enough to create even the Real Church. He calls very graciously and very sternly. He calls the sleeping and the very busy, the weary and the sad. He also calls the secret and the open hypocrites in the Church. He calls to repentance, to conversion, to confession of faith. He calls for meek and for courageous people. Time will have to show whether too much or too little has been ventured by the great undertaking at Amsterdam. Whether it stands or falls will depend on whether He calls there and whether it pleases Him to make Himself heard there. But the smallest village church can be more important than the whole Amsterdam Assembly, should it happen that they return to and acknowledge the Real Church with heart and mind and lips—in the sense of the 54th question of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, where the answer to the question of what we think of the Church is that the Real Church can be touched by hands:

That out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to the end, the Son of God, by His Spirit and Word, gathers, defends and preserves for Himself unto everlasting life a chosen communion, in the unity of the true faith, and that I am and shall remain for ever a living member of the same.