

JOHN MILTON'S VIEW ON THE „TRUE” CHURCH

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Abstract: *This study attempts to examine Milton's ecclesiology by carefully looking at the arguments manifested in his Christian Doctrine, understood by most scholars to be one of his final theological works. This paper will examine Milton's ideal ecclesiology in three areas. First, it investigates whether a return to the New Testament church could really reform any church, as Milton suggested. Secondly, if this proves impossible, it explores what might be the most positive contribution of his ecclesiology. Thirdly, it examines the validity of his ecclesiology in our time by focusing on the positive and negative aspects of his ideal 'true' church. The background of Milton's ecclesiology is briefly examined. The different aspects of his ideal church and evaluating this in relation to the NT church are discussed. The practical significance of the paper determines the advantages and disadvantages of his ecclesiology when applied to our post-modern era.*

Keywords: religion, ministers, catholic church, lay, spirituality.

John Milton, the 17th-century British genius poet, saw that the completion of church reforms could be possible if believers possessed a true concept of church. He argued that since this church had already been presented in the New Testament¹, any religious reforms would naturally take place if believers strictly observed the teachings of the Scripture. John Milton (1608-1674) believed that Luther and Calvin had failed to complete the religious reforms of the 16th century². However, the fruit of their reform activities had contributed to weakening the absolute power of the Catholic Church, which resided in the authority and power of the Pope, and allowed the possibility for the saints to start living a free religious life.³ In the end, though, the Lutheran and Reformed Church, which they created, was as systematic and institutional as Catholicism. The Anglican Church in England and the Presbyterian Church in Scotland followed a similar model of institutional church structure without resolving the problems of Catholicism.

In order not to repeat the failures of those continental reformers, Milton insisted that the “perfect” church model could be found in the New Testament

¹ New Testament, 2020. Available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/nt?lang=eng>.

² S. Park, *Milton's biography*, Blue Histoy Press, Seoul, 2008.

³ O. Pavlyshyn, “The interdisciplinary relationships of semiotics of law and religion”, in *Law Journal of the National Academy of Internal Affairs*, 2021, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 161-169; V. Tymoshenko, “Religion and legal research”, in *Scientific Journal of the National Academy of Internal Affairs*, 2021, vol. 104, no. 3, p. 289-300.

(NT)⁴. For Milton, this church was a place where each individual soul could receive the nutrients that allowed them to rest and live freely. This church was also a community that directed the saints to interact with each other and to live beautiful lives. In Milton's eyes, this church was a crossroad between death and life in each individual's journey⁵. Milton had initially supported the Presbyterian Church, and later the congregational or independent church, when he worked with the Puritan revolutionary Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658). Yet, at the end of his life, he preferred the loosely organized small church, or house church, to any structured institutional church. This study will briefly examine the background to Milton's ecclesiology before discussing the different aspects of his ideal church and evaluating this in relation to the NT church. Finally, we will look at the advantages and disadvantages of his ecclesiology when applied to our post-modern era.

Milton was born on December 9, 1608 to a wealthy family in London. His father, John Milton Senior (1562?-1647), provided him with a high-quality home and school education, including the study of music and the Puritan faith. Milton's early faith was formed under the influences of his father, Richard Stock (1569-1626), an Anglican pastor, and Thomas Young (1587-1655), a Scottish Presbyterian theologian. Since Stock and Young were Puritans from Cambridge University, they influenced Milton in the common sense of broad Puritan theology⁶. They did not hesitate to criticize the Roman Catholic Church of the time and hated the way it acted against the truth. Therefore, Milton was not exposed to any Calvinism or hostility toward the Presbyterian Church in his younger years. It was also due to their influence that Milton studied at Cambridge University.

Milton was disappointed in all of the institutional churches. He was to loathe the Catholic Church more than anything else. The Pope, the head of the Catholic Church, exercised higher authority than that of the Bible⁷, he believed. He reasoned this idolization paralyzed the rationality of the saints, promoted superstition, and suppressed the freedom of conscience granted to each individual. In 1673, he published "Of True Religion, Heresie, Schism and Tolerance", in which he criticized the Catholic Church as the least sound Weed: "Popery is the only or the greatest Heresie; and he who is so forward to brand all others for Hereticks, the obstinate Papist, the only Heretic. Hence

⁴ New Testament, 2020. Available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/nt?lang=eng>.

⁵ J. Milton, "Christian Doctrine" (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

⁶ J. Chung, *Puritan history*, Word of Life Press, Seoul, 1996.

⁷ Bible, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/>.

one of their own famous Writers found just cause to stile the Romish Church, Mother of Error, School of Heresie”⁸.

For Milton, the Anglican Church was not a true church either, because the clergy of the Episcopal Church were hired scoundrels of the state. They invaded the conscience and freedom of the individual saints and forced useless and meaningless religious rituals upon them. Not only that, but they committed irregularities by demanding the saints pay tithes and religious taxes for their livelihood. Milton addressed these problems in “Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church”⁹. In this work, he diagnosed the church's clerical hierarchy and unorthodox worship services as serious problems¹⁰.

In addition, Milton was not satisfied with the Presbyterian Church, which he had an affection for in the early days of the Puritan Revolution. Milton greatly despaired when he realized that many Presbyterian leaders were compromising with the royalists. Milton insisted on the separation of religion and politics and could not thereby allow the attempts to make the Presbyterian Church into a form of national religion¹¹. To sum up, in Milton's view, the churches in Britain at that time were in a state of secularization and spiritual anarchy; all were eager to compromise with politics. For Milton, the only way to heal this religious abyss was to create a new “true” church based on the teachings and examples of the NT¹².

Analysis of the Milton's „true church” concept

Milton described the “true” church as “a society of persons professing the faith, united by a special bond of brotherhood, and chiefly organized for the purpose of promoting mutual edification and the communion of the saints”¹³. To put it simply, the church is a special body that distinguishes itself from the world. This body is a spiritual society where God's Word is proclaimed, proper sacrament is practiced, and the wonderful fellowship of the believers is maintained. This church is the universal church that has manifested itself in time and space in different cultures. It is not a specific national church such as a Jewish synagogue, or a Catholic or Anglican Church, but rather it is

⁸ J. Milton, “Considerations touching the likeliest means to remove hirelings out of the church” (vol. 7), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1982.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ J. Choi, *The life and thought of John Milton*, Yeok-lak Publishing Co., Seoul, 2011.

¹¹ J. Choi, *Middle Milton: Milton's prose*, Kyeongbuk University Press, Daegu, 2014.

¹² New Testament, 2020. Available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/nt?lang=eng>.

¹³ J. Milton, “Christian Doctrine” (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

“a particular church within the walls of a private house where no great number of believers are assembled”¹⁴. Since there should be no national church, the universal church can also appear as many individual churches, “each absolute in itself and equal to the others in divine right and power. These, like similar and homogenous components, joined together by a bond of mutual equality, form a single, catholic church. No one of them has any need to go to another for anything ... Particular churches can consult together in fraternal harmony and cooperate to achieve what they trust will be to the benefit of the universal church”¹⁵.

A visible church on earth, however, ends up having a good influence on the world or having negative consequences, depending on the personality and leadership of those who serve it. In other words, the life of the church is determined by the pastors who guide it, for it essentially involves human-powered devices. Thus, Milton was very careful to explain what to consider in the choice of the pastors who serve the church.

Milton argued that the ministers of the church are, in principle, teachers and pastors; these titles do not refer to different agencies but simply distinguish two separate functions. Sometimes teachers and pastors are separate so that the functions of teaching and exhortation can be performed independently. For Milton, “Any believer can be an ordinary minister, whenever necessary, so long as he is provided with certain gifts, which constitute his mission”¹⁶. In fact, Milton claimed that qualified laymen could be the ministers of the church¹⁷. Milton cited the qualifications of a lay pastor, first, as being the head of a family, such as a father or an eldest son. On that basis, Milton contended that Abel, Noah, Abraham, and Aaron led their family church as head of their households in the Old Testament (OT). Secondly, anyone suitable to proclaim the Word is well qualified as a minister. For this reason, even though Christ was not a priest-educated professional, he preached in the synagogue. And during the times of persecution in the early church, laymen were dispersed to deliver the Word¹⁸.

Milton further explained the leadership of lay people using the example of the Apostle Paul, who told Timothy to choose the faithful to teach others¹⁹. Here “the faithful” refers to the laymen. After mentioning the concept of layman in the NT, Milton sharply criticized the clergy of his time: “Our modern clergy, if that is the right name for them, who claim the right of preaching as theirs alone, would not have been glad had they seen this grace

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ S. Kim, *A study on John Milton's particularism and universalism*, Gibbeum Madang, Seoul, 2014.

¹⁸ J. Milton, “Christian Doctrine” (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

¹⁹ 2 Tim. 2:2, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/2-timothy/2/>.

extended to the laity, as they call them, but would have been more likely to condemn it”²⁰. It is obvious for Milton that the term clergy means the whole church, not merely the ecclesiastics. In addition, Milton insisted that the word “prophet is applied not only to a man able to foretell the future but also to anyone endowed with exceptional piety and wisdom for the purpose of teaching”²¹. Therefore, lay believers who are faithful, reverent, and full of wisdom can proclaim the Gospel.

They also have the right to conduct such rituals as baptism and Holy Communion. According to Milton, the highest honor a minister has is the preaching privilege. If a layman can perform this glorious preaching duty, baptism and sacrament, which are less important than preaching, can be performed by lay leaders. Milton argued that as the laymen circumcised the children in the OT²², it was natural for the laymen of the NT to baptize the saints. In connection to this, Milton concluded that “the communion of the Lord’s Supper is something which belongs to all believers, and that its administration is not the particular right of any man or order of men”²³. Moreover, Milton stated that weddings and funerals could be carried out by these lay people without question because such rituals are lower-level practices compared to the baptism and sacrament. Milton blamed the contemporary clergy who, in their clerical hierarchy, claimed the exclusive right of weddings and funerals: “these hirelings customarily claim it as their exclusive right, without a shadow of scriptural justification”.

Milton divided church ministers into presbyters (elders), or bishops, and deacons. Some of the elders of the NT are described as teachers and trainers. The elders and bishops are referred to as “overseers”²⁴. The duties of the elders are to “fix their attention upon the whole flock ... to feed the church of God”²⁵. The elders should be blameless in terms of both spiritual and moral aspects and thereby receive the proper respect of the believers. Above all, as good administrators, they should be well acquainted with the knowledge of the Scripture to discipline the saints. For Milton, any person who possesses these qualities could be an elder, namely, a minister. Here too, Milton resolutely defined ministers as ordinary ministers, not as priests of a special clerical class.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Old Testament, 2020. Available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/ot?lang=eng>.

²³ J. Milton, “Christian Doctrine” (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

²⁴ Titus 1:7, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/titus/1/>.

²⁵ J. Milton, “Christian Doctrine” (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

There is no intention at all to distinguish priests with the honor of a special status²⁶.

The deacon's ministry is to take care of church members, paying special attention to the poor, the sick, and the traveler in need. Another function of the deacon is to teach and baptize. Milton offered Acts 8²⁷ as a clear example of lay leadership. Although Philip, in this verse, was nothing but a deacon, he not only preached the Gospel but also administered the rite of baptism²⁸. All in all, Milton concluded that the church's pulpit should be open to all qualified persons.

The choice of minister is the right of the saints. Before choosing a minister, the saints must check whether they are workers of no shame²⁹. After this checking process, the elders of the church give the chosen ministers a restful blessing and encourage them to handle church tasks well. Regarding the remuneration of ministers, Milton said it is Biblical for ministers to be paid, but in reality, he placed more emphasis on no pay being given: "It is better to serve God's church for nothing, following the Lord's example"³⁰. Milton highlighted a number of natural benefits of ministers serving the church without pay. First, the ministers will set an example of true obedience to the Lord. Second, ministers are free from all attacks and doubts caused by material problems. Third, this pure service is a brighter and more beautiful way to please God. Milton, however, admitted that sometimes it may be necessary for ministers to be paid, as in the example of the Apostle Paul, who was almost always self-sufficient as a tent-making man³¹. Paul occasionally received material support from the saints, which he could not refuse because the support was freely and spontaneously prepared with joy.

Milton suggested that church ministers receive material support just like Paul. He expressed the need for extremely high standards when handling the remuneration of ministers. This was intended not for the sake of the minister's own economic affluence, but for the sake of the congregation. Milton thought it was a destruction of the Gospel that ministers received economic help to maintain their livelihood. He said: "To bargain for or exact tithes or gospel-taxes, to extort a subsidy from the flock by force or by the intervention of the magistrates, to invoke the civil law in order to secure church revenue, and to

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Acts 8, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/acts/8/>.

²⁸ J. Milton, "Christian Doctrine" (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

²⁹ Tim. 3, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/1-timothy/3/>.

³⁰ J. Milton, "Christian Doctrine" (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

³¹ Acts 18, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/acts/18/>.

take such matters into the courts – these are the actions of wolves, not ministers of the gospel”³².

In short, Milton did not agree that ministers should receive financial support from believers, as a special class. They should not expect regular financial income from the saints unless it was unavoidable. To fulfill this goal, they should have some kind of job “making use of [their] own abilities, by some trade or some respectable profession”³³. Here Milton again called for a layman's ministry. For Milton, this kind of church ministered by lay leaders is the “true” church. He affirmed: “Although it may have only a few members, [it] is to be considered a self-contained and complete church ... it will enjoy the scriptures and promises, the presence of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit, and the favor of those gifts which are to be obtained by communal prayer”.

Milton accepted the two kinds of sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Milton viewed the baptism of the NT as a development of the circumcision of the OT. Baptism is a ceremony in which believers of Jesus Christ immerse themselves in running water to pledge themselves to the purity of life³⁴. This symbolizes union with Jesus Christ and the re-creation through the Holy Spirit. Thus, baptism is a holy symbol of the fact that the baptized person comes out of the water and greets Christ's death, burial, and resurrection with faith, confirming that he or she is united with Christ. In addition, the baptismal ritual symbolizes the unity, equality, and independence of the church, which becomes one body within the Holy Spirit regardless of the genders, ages, or occupations that make up the congregation³⁵. It is also the church's initiation and vow to live for the Lord and the Gospel, as the saints, regardless of whether they are slaves or free people, are recognized as new creatures in the new community of faith.

Milton did not like the notion that “baptism means sprinkling,” because it should be an immersion. Although baptism is a symbol, it is a very important symbol of Christ's painful life. Milton could not allow that some people have “substituted sprinkling for immersion in baptism”³⁶. When people wash their hands with water, their hands need to go into the water to finish washing. Likewise, Milton asserted, our body should go into the water to complete the baptism, the holy church's initiation ceremony. Milton denied infant baptism because infants cannot understand the Bible³⁷. As they do not understand the Word, naturally they cannot obey the Word. And those who do not obey the

³² J. Milton, “Christian Doctrine” (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ 1 Cor. 12, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/1-corinthians/12/>.

³⁶ J. Milton, “Christian Doctrine” (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

³⁷ Bible, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/>.

Word cannot live a reverent life. Infants, who do not fully exercise their consciences, cannot make true vows to believe in Jesus. In other words, infants, who cannot make free and rational judgments, cannot have normal faith. In this respect, infants cannot confess their sins or repent.

As for the Lord's Supper, Milton said: "[It] commemorates the death of Christ by the breaking of bread and the pouring out of wine; both are tasted by all present, and the benefits of his death are sealed to believers"³⁸. Tasting only visible and physical bread and wine without spiritual grounds is not eating the spiritual food of heaven, but merely tasting the matter of the land that has no benefit or effect³⁹. In this sense, the sacrament attendees should note that it is not the actual body and blood of Christ that bread and wine become. Bread is the doctrine that indicates Christ suffered on the cross for us. Wine is the doctrinal teaching that the blood of Christ has shed for us. The saints who have accepted these doctrines as the true faith will live forever. Just as we know for sure that when we receive bread and wine at communion by faith, we also realize more clearly that we take eternal life. Milton affirmed that the Lord's Supper is treated as a doctrinal symbol, and it is by no means worthless, but spiritually sealed with absolute certainty⁴⁰. Another benefit lies in the unity of the church through participation in the Lord's Supper.

Milton theologically specified the importance of the sacraments but was very free about their actual application in the church. Milton strongly stated that "sacraments are not required". Milton offered several reasons for this: "First, because many have achieved salvation without them; women without circumcision for example ... and no doubt many infants and many ... had not been baptized. Thus, also many received the gifts of the Spirit through the Word and faith alone⁴¹. Second, because seals do not constitute the covenant but only make it public.... it is the Spirit which gives life and it is faith which feeds, and that actual feeding, in physical sense, cannot always conveniently take place and is not absolutely necessary". In short, Milton understood that the practice of the sacrament is only a symbolic church activity and is therefore a free choice of the saints, rather than an obligation: "Clearly, if the sacrament is nothing but a seal, or rather a sort of symbol, it is not wrong for a man to have just as much trust in God, even without the seal, when it is not convenient for him to receive it properly. After all, he can give thanks to God

³⁸ J. Milton, "Christian Doctrine" (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

³⁹ M.A. Alshynbaeva, S. Mazhitayeva, B. Kaliyev, N. Nygmetova, G.S. Khamzina, "Linguocultural anatomical code: Concept of sacredness", in *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 2021, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 1-13.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Acts 10, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/acts/10/>.

and commemorate the death of Christ in many other ways every day of his life, even if he does not do so in the ceremonial way which God has instituted”⁴².

Milton stated that the congregation of the saints is itself a church; and each saint not only enters into a covenant with God, but also enters a covenant with the other saints. This means that “when any individual joins a particular church he should, as if he were entering into a covenant, make a solemn promise to God and to his church that he will, insofar as he is able, carry out every office... which may concern either his own edification or that of his fellows”. The saints must grow spiritually through God’s Word and the church fellowship. Of course, they should learn the Word from the ministers. This Word becomes an indicator of one’s life with the help of the Holy Spirit. In addition, the saints must receive spiritual training from the administrative church leaders. These trainers should refrain from criticizing the weak and those who have fallen away by guiding them smoothly and correctly. The churches must make wise adjustments if discord appears between the saints due to different opinions. If any offenders disobey the mediation of the churches and behave evilly, the church leaders must give a public warning. If the public rebuking is not obeyed, they are to be segregated from the communion⁴³. If they continue to do evil without repentance, the church can eject them.

Regarding polygamy, Milton accepted it as a form of true marriage. If the practice of polygamy is wrong, Milton protested, then “Abraham and the other patriarchs [would be] fornicators and adulterers, and their most holy offspring [would be] bastards... Thus, the orthodox view – that polygamy is not true marriage – is as absurd as it is blasphemous, and furthermore finds no support in Scripture”. Milton continued: “It is very unjust, and a very dangerous precedent in religion to consider something a sin when it is not a sin”⁴⁴.

Another issue related to Milton’s concept of marriage is divorce. Milton publicly exposed the issue of divorce to British society several times between 1643 and 1645. In “The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce” (1643), Milton greatly expanded on the reasons for divorce. The traditional reasons for divorce were moral flaws between couples, but now even differences in temperament and personality are said to be just reasons for divorce. Milton concluded that God permits divorce. For example, Deuteronomy 24:1⁴⁵ states, “If a man... finds something indecent about [his wife] and he writes her a

⁴² J. Milton, “Christian Doctrine” (vol. 6.), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ J. Milton, “Considerations touching the likeliest means to remove hirelings out of the church” (vol. 7), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1982.

⁴⁵ Deuteronomy 24:1, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/deuteronomy/24/>.

certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her.” Milton comprehended the word “indecent” as “any real nakedness,” which refers “to the mind as well as to the body”⁴⁶.

Evaluation of Milton's ecclesiology from the New Testament perspective

The ideal church, according to Milton, is not a national church or one made up of powerful institutions or organizations, but an independent church or house church that enjoys the fullest religious freedoms. His claim that the NT church began in the form of house churches is justified⁴⁷. The believers of the NT church gradually separated from Jewish worship services and began forming independent Christian communities. There were two main reasons for this. First, the house churches were formed quite naturally to avoid the diverse persecutions faced by Judaism. To keep their faith, the churches had to maintain their religious life secretly not to draw unwanted attention. The churches could not use any visible public buildings as places of worship.

The second reason is a theological one. The NT church was not a building but an ecclesia, that is, an assembly of holy people who confess “Jesus is the Christ.” Now Jews and Christians could no longer go the same way. The leaders of these churches were mostly laymen. Acts 18⁴⁸, for example, states: “After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla... Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.” Priscilla and Aquila, the Apostle Paul’s co-workers, served a family church while working with Paul to make tents. The couple excelled in Biblical knowledge enough to teach a great scholar, Apollos, who did not know about certain aspects of the Holy Spirit. They “invited him to their home [church] and explained to him the way of God more adequately”⁴⁹. The ministries associated with education, evangelism, missionary work, relief, and healing services were carried out in the house churches⁵⁰. The apostles, the direct disciples of Jesus, visited these churches like itinerant missionaries, and helped the lay leaders to properly serve the scattered Christians in their houses.

Milton correctly pointed out that most early church ministers did voluntary unpaid ministry. However, the Bible⁵¹ teaches that it is perfectly

⁴⁶ J. Milton, “Doctrine and discipline of Divore” (vol. 2), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1959.

⁴⁷ R.W. Gehring, *House church and mission*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 2004.

⁴⁸ Acts 18, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/acts/18/>.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ Acts 5, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/acts/5/>.

⁵¹ Bible, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/>.

reasonable for pastors to be economically rewarded⁵². The NT also suggests that it is good for ministers not to voluntarily receive a reward when it becomes an obstacle to the Gospel⁵³. So, the church should not be stingy in providing a reasonable honorarium to ministers who serve the Gospel. Milton appears to advocate for unpaid ministry a little more profusely.

Milton testified that the NT church was the perfect church, offering mutual equality and abundant freedom. But this was not true. Theoretically, the ministers of house churches were equal, but their positions changed depending on who was serving the church. If an apostolic minister, such as Peter or Paul, was to serve, the church became of greater importance than other churches, and its authority was different. There was a hierarchical order that drew some visible lines between the apostles and lay ministers. The lay ministers were in a position of obedience, learning from the apostles. By the time Peter and Paul were martyred, the bishop of Rome already stood superior to the bishops of other countries and acted as a big brother. For Peter and Paul were in a position to advise various local churches of the world⁵⁴.

The NT church was a special church operated by many lay leaders and a few apostle-level pastors in a special historical environment amid persecution and hardship. The church accepted the ministry of this special environment as the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The lay pastors maintained the unity of the churches by obeying the spiritual guidance and teachings of the apostles. We see ample evidence for this. The house churches were composed of family members, relatives, and slaves. They held their own independent services in their houses, but, when necessary, they formed a joint assembly of the local house churches. Acts 20⁵⁵ indicates that the whole congregation in Troas was waiting for the Apostle Paul, as they were eager to learn from him. Thus, they set up the house church which had the largest space compared with the other house churches as the venue for the united assembly. When Paul arrived, there was no place for a young Eutychus to sit due to there being too many people, so he sat in the window. Paul spoke to the saints until midnight.

This story teaches us that the apostles, such as Paul, often gathered all the members of the house churches together to worship or provide necessary religious education. This shows how the early church recognized a certain amount of autonomy of each house church while, at the same time, striving for the unity of the entire church. In other words, the teachings of the Apostle Paul that the independence of each church should not harm the unity of the whole church are evident here. In short, the unity, equality, and worship consciousness of the church did not come from Milton-styled personal faith or

⁵² 1 Cor. 9, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/1-corinthians/9/>.

⁵³ Phil. 4, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/philippians/4/>.

⁵⁴ M. Kang, J. Chung, *Early and medieval church history*, The Sun and Moon Press, Kwangju, 2013.

⁵⁵ Acts 20, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/acts/20/>.

human freedom, but from the spiritual teachings of the apostolic leaders. The NT lay ministers were not always independent of the apostles or apostle-level pastors, enjoying spiritual equal rights. Milton tended to view the spiritual independence and equality of church ministers in terms of a notion of universal freedom enjoyed by all humanity, and in doing so he seems to have overstretched the nature of the NT's layman ministry.

Milton regarded the practice of the sacraments as a significant and important symbol of the church in theological theory. However, in practice, as we have seen, he treated them as optional. This optional treatment is a contradiction of Milton's theology. If the church's main precepts, such as communion and baptism, are treated as optional, it weakens the church's inherent spirituality. A scholar has addressed the importance of Holy Communion "as a key factor to every Christian community [because it] is not just sharing of a meal together. It has a greater significance of denying the separation by race, status, and all other kinds of conflict and division. It represents reconciliation and participation as brothers and sisters in a living community of one heart and one purpose. This is why Holy Communion is called the most holy and mysterious unity in the fellowship of believers" (Chung, 2010). Sacramental rituals "may serve a positive function in a religion or culture. They may be able to help people experience the divine presence, to maintain a sense of inner security"⁵⁶. They can be "harmonizing, integrating, and psychologically supportive"⁵⁷.

Milton's acceptance of polygamy shows his misunderstanding of marriage in the OT. According to Genesis 2:21-23⁵⁸: "God caused the man [Adam] to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman", for she was taken out of man"" (NIV). This story affirms monogamy. Jesus also strongly supports this monogamy: "At the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate"⁵⁹. A similar spirit is well illustrated by Proverb 5⁶⁰: "May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth." The OT did not recognize polygamy as a standard

⁵⁶ J. Chung, *Social criticism of Uchimura Kanzo and Kim Kyo-shin*, UBF Press, Seoul, 1988.

⁵⁷ C. Geertz, *The interpretations of cultures*, Basic Books, New York, 1973.

⁵⁸ Genesis 2, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/genesis/2/>.

⁵⁹ Matt. 19, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/matthew/19/>.

⁶⁰ Proverb 5, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/proverbs/5/>.

social norm but only reluctantly allowed the customs of polygamy that were observed at that time by people of low spiritual levels.

Milton exposed the issue of divorce and opened it up from the realm of private secrecy to public debate. He showed the wisdom of dealing with divorce as a key issue in public society. In this regard, Milton became one of the most remembered prophets of all time and achieved liberty of speech⁶¹. The Bible does not unilaterally condemn divorce, and, under special circumstances, it recognizes divorce quite clearly⁶². Milton's argument for dealing with divorce in civil courts rather than in religious courts is flawless. This is because God of the Bible created the marriage system Himself⁶³ but did not create a divorce system. At the base of Milton's idea for claiming divorce is his honest hope of seeking family recovery and happiness. This hope should not be ostracized in principle, but most of his divorce arguments need to be revised. Milton's interpretation of the Bible on divorce has revealed many distortions by arbitrarily releasing the text⁶⁴. For instance, Milton quotes Deuteronomy 24:1⁶⁵ to justify divorce. This verse is not intended to encourage divorce but to prevent it from being abused and to protect women from unfair divorces⁶⁶. Milton's reasons for divorce include murder, lewdness, abandonment, theft, disease, and mental inconsistency. Today the world seems to be in concord that these reasons are rational grounds for divorce. Yet most Bible-believing Christians will choose better methods to solve divorce problems: forgiveness and love which can be manifested through prayer and moderation⁶⁷.

Evaluation of Milton's ecclesiology from today's perspective

Milton's ideal ecclesiology has many strengths and weaknesses. Milton's ecclesiology serves as a powerful social and religious criticism, asking institutional churches to carefully reflect on whether their religious bodies are in line with the essential Christian teachings. Also, the Milton-styled

⁶¹ S. Yim, *Areopagitica*, Nanam Press, Seoul, 1998.

⁶² Matt. 19, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/matthew/19/>.

⁶³ Genesis 2, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/genesis/2/>.

⁶⁴ M. Kryvoshei, "Linguistic and philosophical dimension of the text as a sign system", in *Astra Salvensis*, 2021, p. 9-11.

⁶⁵ Deuteronomy 24:1, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/deuteronomy/24/>.

⁶⁶ J.E. Adams, *Marriage, divorce, and remarriage in the Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1980.

⁶⁷ S.K. Almukhanov, G.K. Zhapekova, A.I. Begimtayev, M.S. Kulakhmetova, A.K. Shabambayeva, "Existential foundations of the transcendental subject: Defense potential of Christianity", in *Journal of Language and Literature*, 2015, vol. 6, no. 4, p. 370-376; G.K. Ismagulova, O.N. Polevaya, G.Z. Balgabayeva, M.S. Kulakhmetova, D.E. Kapanova, "The formation of the foundation of academic writing", in *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, 2016, vol. 11, no. 11, p. 4194-4204.

independent or house church can be used as a safe ground for the autonomy and freedom of the saints. The saints can control the time of worship according to the circumstances of the family without being bound by highly-structured churches. This means that one's religious life can be privately internalized without having any artificial authority of organized institutional churches. Each believer can train to develop their own spirituality, treating one's house church as a quiet monastery⁶⁸. A person whose spirituality has been developed in this way can give their remaining energy to the public sphere for social reform as Milton envisioned. In addition, Milton cherished the lay-oriented ministry, believing that this lay ministry demonstrated a solution to the problem of the church's finances. Milton's lay ministry model seems to be of great help to any self-supporting ministry⁶⁹. Some Protestant churches in South Korea and the United States apply this model in special environments where there are few church members who are not able to financially support their pastors⁷⁰.

Milton insisted on religious freedom, allowing tolerance for the so-called sectarian churches because everyone has a right to choose one's church through one's own rational free will. Milton's claim of religious tolerance, then, faces a problem. If individuals use reason and free will to choose the Catholic, Anglican, or Presbyterian Churches, it would be a contradiction to attack them for this freedom of choice. Milton strongly argued for the removal of the Catholic Church from his *Of True Religion*: "Popery as being Idolatrous, is not to be tolerated either in Public or in Private; it must be now thought how to remove"⁷¹.

Milton warned that ordinary people fall into idolatry, bound by past traditions and customs, rather than choosing the right church through the proper use of reason and free will. Here Milton asserted that an intelligent and rational person could lead a true religious life without falling into idolatry. Milton overlooked that religious issues have a capacity to embrace the instinctive and intuitive realm. This capacity often transcends human reason and free will. When brainwashed by a particular religion through this capacity, the area of human reason and free will does not always work as positively as Milton thought.

⁶⁸ S. Chukkali, A.M. Dey, "Development and validation of superstitious beliefs scale", in *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 2020, vol. 12, no. 1, article number 32.

⁶⁹ J. Chung, *A short history of university Bible fellowship*, Gospel Culture Publishing Co., Kwangju, 1992.

⁷⁰ N.S. Altayeva, K.A. Zatov, K.M. Bishmanov, K. Bagasharov, M. Nurzat, "The ontological characteristics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints", in *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 2020, vol. 12, no. 1, article number v12n115.

⁷¹ J. Milton, "Considerations touching the likeliest means to remove hirelings out of the church" (vol. 7), in D.M. Wolfe (Ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1982.

Small independent or house churches have multiple tendencies to be associated with division and factional strife. The NT churches did not always demonstrate a beautiful service of shared love and harmony. There was antagonism and jealousy between factional divisions. The Corinthian churches were divided around Paul, Apollos, and Peter⁷². The churches in Jerusalem were divided into Hebrews and Greeks⁷³. The Philippian house churches were troubled by the problems of division, so Paul said: “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord”⁷⁴. Through these NT house churches we learned that the early church was not a complete, perfect church. The churches were bound to have factional struggles when a particular person was at the center. Also, when strong spiritual authority was emphasized within the churches, divisions occurred. In particular, the ambiguity of doctrines appeared to suggest the absence of orthodox faith, which tended to lead straight to heresy. Milton's rational lay-oriented independent church, if it failed to come up with a way to address such factional strife, would continue to bring about church divisions and would have difficulty forming the healthy identity and unity that the church should have.

Also, the disadvantage is the lack of macroscopic influence. It may be difficult for house churches to achieve the embodiment of united power. There is a limit to exercising such aims as spreading Christian culture through praise rallies and art exhibitions that will touch and benefit large audiences. Of course, these problems can be overcome through carefully organized house church associations. Yet the small churches should not overlook such difficulties in speed, continuity, and efficiency. For the coalition to operate well, it needs outstanding leadership which is not always easy to find among scattered house churches.

If one's religious freedom is suppressed, one can maintain one's house church as a proper resistance to maintain one's spiritual life. A prime example of this resistance was Uchimura Kanzo (1861-1930). He rejected both denominational Christian churches and the Shinto religion which forced the Japanese to worship the Japanese Emperor in the early twentieth century (Chung, 1998)⁷⁵. He criticized all religions in Japan, including Christianity, for they were immersed in the Emperor worship. In order to overcome this national cult, Uchimura founded Non-Church Christianity (mukyokai, 無教會), a kind of small independent church. The Non-Church, for Uchimura, was not a denial of the Biblical church, but rather a true “house church” ministered through Milton-style lay leadership⁷⁶.

⁷² 1 Cor. 1, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/1-corinthians/1/>.

⁷³ Acts 6, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/acts/6/>.

⁷⁴ Phil. 4, 2020. Available at <https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/philippians/4/>.

⁷⁵ J. Chung, *Evangelical movement*, Kwangshin University Press, Kwangju, 1998.

⁷⁶ J. Chung, *Missiological criticism on culture*, Sachan Publishing Press, Seoul, 1995.

Every higher religion has at least three components – clergyman, scripture, and religious ceremony. The clergymen gather the saints in their own religious institutions to lead the congregation by teaching their own scriptures and executing religious ceremonies. In this process, they naturally have both spiritual authority and secular power. They can even influence society by mobilizing the saints to resist a government; they can have an indirect influence on the selection of a specific political candidate in an election. Furthermore, much of the money in the churches can be used according to the will of the clergymen. The clergymen may fall into injustice and corruption in collusion with politicians or social interest groups. Milton clearly saw these weak points of the institutional churches. Milton grasped that when religion is secularized, its adverse function is further deepened.

Since the 1980s, South Korean Protestantism has been in a position to be strongly criticized by Milton because the Protestant Church has not been exercising the spiritual power of the previous generation. Early Korean Protestantism shared the fate of the Korean people and nation from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. During the brutal Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945), the church was at the center of the national independence movement. All meetings and worship served as fateful entities where people comforted and encouraged each other in God's name. The church was the home of enlightenment for the uneducated. She pioneered the abolition of social classes by proclaiming for equality between men and women⁷⁷. The church was the place where the wounded were healed. However, from the 1980s, Korea succeeded in achieving an industrialization faster than any other country in the world. Hyundai and other big companies entered the ranks of economically highly developed companies. Korea's educational zeal has been so high that there is little illiteracy, and, in terms of public security, it has become one of the safest countries in the world. Current church members are outwardly religious, as in the past. They spend astonishingly long days in the church. However, a considerable number of church members are not interested to fulfill the role of providing light and salt in society⁷⁸.

Conclusions

Milton's criticism of the institutional church has a strong message not only for Christians but also for religious people more generally. His ecclesiology makes positive spiritual room for certain people like Uchimura.

⁷⁷ M. Jeong, "A holistic mission approach: a case study of missionary John Van Neste Talmage", in *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 2019, vol. 23, no. 1, p. 62-77.

⁷⁸ P. Pattison, *Crisis Unawares*, OMF Press, Hongkong, 1981.

Milton's ecclesiology also has the strength of being able to be temporarily accommodated in high-profile crises such as with "COVID-19", which began in 2019. The epidemic has forced many people around the world to accept a life of staying at home and avoiding contact with outsiders. Naturally, many religious people have kept their own religious activities in their homes, which can be seen as a form of house church.

Milton's criticism of institutional religion is seen as a very important factor of, as well as a remedy to, the degradation of all religions in the world. Thus, Milton's ecclesiology may be regarded as one of the most valuable contributions to a powerful socio-religious criticism for the ages.