

The Necessity of Church Membership

by Dr. Chuck Baynard

May a true believer choose not to belong to the organized or recognized body of Christ as made manifest in a local church fellowship? Even a cursory examination of the Bible returns a most emphatic no; all members of the body will join themselves to the church of Christ.

In an attempt to show both the universality of the church and the exclusive nature of the church reformed theologians created a false dichotomy of a visible or militant church and a church triumphant or invisible church. The invisible church consists of all the believers in Jesus Christ from eternity past to eternity future. The visible church consists of all who profess Christ and join themselves to a local fellowship (church). I say it is a false dichotomy because though it is true both of these natures exist in the church there is only one church of Christ. Christ left to the church all power and authority and to have left this power to an ambiguous invisible church would be ridiculous.

H. Bullinger in the Second Helvetic Confession of Faith notes that outside the church there is normally no salvation.¹ This is nuanced with the word normally because we dare not limit God as the Holy Spirit blows where He wills. Yet this concept of gathered believers is so prevalent in the Bible all believers will seek out and join themselves to this true body of Christ. John Calvin likewise maintained the position that outside of the church there was no salvation.²

Matthew 16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. While almost all point

¹ Outside the Church of God There Is No Salvation. But we esteem fellowship with the true Church of Christ so highly that we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from it. For as there was no salvation outside Noah's ark when the world perished in the flood; so we believe that there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church; and hence we teach that those who wish to live ought not to be separated from the true Church of Christ. 2nd Helvetic Confession of Faith XVII

² But as it is now our purpose to discourse of the visible Church, let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of mortal flesh, we become like the angels, (Matth. 22: 30.) For our weakness does not permit us to leave the school until we have spent our whole lives as scholars. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for, as Isaiah and Joel testify, (Isa. 37: 32; Joel 2: 32.) To their testimony Ezekiel subscribes, when he declares, "They shall not be in the assembly of my people, neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel," (Ezek. 13: 9;) as, on the other hand, those who turn to the cultivation of true piety are said to inscribe their names among the citizens of Jerusalem. For which reason it is said in the psalm, "Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that thou bearest unto thy people: O visit me with thy salvation; that I may see the good of thy chosen, that I may rejoice in the gladness of thy nation, that I may glory with thine inheritance," (Ps. 106: 4, 6.) By these words the paternal favour of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal.

to Pentecost (Acts 2) as the manifestation of the New Testament church it remains that the church was founded by Jesus Christ Himself and not of the imagination of man. To reject the church is to reject Christ.

Matthew 10:32 Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. :33 But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. Though a person might stand on the proverbial street corner and shout their profession of faith in Jesus Christ it remains there is no record of this and that there is no line of accountability to test the fruit of this profession. The analogy of church membership and the marriage contract is used to show the relationship between member and church. Marriage contracts have long been recorded by the state, which offers to the persons in that contract recognition of the contract and the power and sanction of the state to enforce these rights of the contract one upon the other. The church brings to the believer these same protections and an encouragement of sanctions in their covenant (profession of belief) with God as the civil government gives to the marriage covenant. The witness of the couple one to the other and the record of the state bring to bear two witnesses that this relationship exists. Likewise it is with church membership and the believer that a covenant relationship with God exists. In marriage the persons submit to uphold their marriage vows under penalty of state sanctions (discipline). In church membership a believer submits to the discipline of the church to faithfully perform their vows in professing Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Hebrews 10:25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. There is a present movement underfoot to turn from the organized church to small house fellowships with little or no structure. This is not a new phenomenon but has existed from the foundation of the Christian church and as such was addressed by the Bible.

On this solid foundation of the Scriptures I dare say unto you that no true believer will for long exclude themselves from the visible body of Christ as exhibited in membership in a local fellowship of Christ (a church). The search for a life mate can be time consuming and at times frustrating, nonetheless all faithfully maintain this search until that compatible person is found and the union with them is made. Likewise a believer may indeed for a season be outside the local fellowship as they search for the place they find the Spirit of God leading them in this present world. That search for a mate however will have a distinct set of criteria and when these are met the search ends. Thus with the search for a church there must be a concrete list of properties of the fellowship being sought and once located joining oneself to this body should not be delayed. While the search for a life mate can at times be subjective the search for a church is not subjective. In obedience to God the believer will seek a church that meets the marks of the true church: 1. The Scriptures are preached. 2. The sacraments are rightly handled. 3. The church practices Christian discipline. *Revelation 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.*

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