



Do we need church membership in an individualistic society?

The visible church in America is an absolute mess. With its scandals involving money, sex, and power, meddling in the realm of transitory political agendas, and with its "relevant" messages that are nothing but irrelevant, it is no wonder that many — including professing Christians — have turned elsewhere.

Nevertheless, as historically conscious and confessional Protestant Christians, we believe that Christ has created a visible Church of those whom the Lord has redeemed. While evangelical Christians say, "I do not need the Church because I have a personal relationship with Jesus," we say that Christ does save individual sinners, but he does so through the means of his Church and in order to bring these sinners into communion with his Body, the Church.

No salvation outside the church

Article 28 of the Belgic Confession opens with a shocking statement: "*Outside of it [the Church] there is no salvation...*" What sounds shocking and "Catholic" was simply the received language of the Church and was affirmed by our Protestant forefathers.

While Origen coined this phrase in his sermon on the story of Rahab, Cyprian of Carthage made it stick in his response to those who separated from the Church to start a new church because the Church was too lax in receiving back into grace those who renounced their faith during persecution under Caesar Decius in 250. A part of Cyprian's response to these followers of Novatian was that "*outside the church there is no salvation,*" meaning, outside the bishop of Rome, there is no salvation.

What is so illuminating for us who live in an individualistic culture is that the Reformers never rejected this phrase. Examples abound. In his *Institutes*, John Calvin said, "*Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.*" Theodore Beza confessed the Reformed churches' belief that the Church was "*the company and community of the saints and without which there could be no salvation.*"

Certainly the Reformers re-interpreted this phrase to mean something other than "outside the Roman Church there is no salvation." As Reformed Christians we mean that salvation is found in the Church that Christ established, with the pure preaching of the Word, pure administration of the sacraments, and church discipline.

In speaking this way, we must keep a simple distinction in mind between the ordinary and extraordinary work of God. We must keep clear what God does and what God can do, or, what he has promised to do and what he has not promised to do.

To the Church Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom, the preaching of the Gospel and discipline (Matthew 16:18-19 cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 83-85; Romans 10:14-17). To the Church those being saved were added daily (Acts 2:47). For the Church Jesus Christ died (Ephesians 5:25-27). For this reason the Church is described as the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:11-22) and the mother of the faithful (Galatians 4:26). This means that God has ordained that salvation is offered for the world not at home, not at the beach, nor in the flock of a hireling (John

10:12, i.e. false Church); therefore, salvation is available where Christ's voice is heard. If you want to expose a non-Christian friend to salvation in Christ, there is a place where you are promised he/she will hear about it: the Church. You would not take your friend to the mall because Christ has not promised to save there.

The necessity of membership

Those who are saved are brought into the community of the saved. As Scripture says, the members of Christ are brought into the Body of Christ (Acts 4:32; Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

As Cyprian wrote, *"He cannot have God as Father unless he has the Church as mother."*

The idea of "church membership" is assumed and taught in the Scriptures because Christians belong to Christ and to each other.

- **First**, the Book of Life is the heavenly archetype of the earthly registers of members of the Church (Hebrews 12:23 cf. Psalm 87:4-6).
- **Second**, the book of Acts speaks of salvation in terms of the Lord adding a "countable" number of people to a definable group (Acts 2:41, 47, 3:4). This number of the disciples was distinguished from what Luke called *"the rest"* (Acts 4:23, 5:13). Membership in this group was visibly signified by the sacrament of baptism, which was the crossing over the boundary of the world into the covenant community, and the sacrament of the Supper, which was the visible sign of maintaining communion in the community (Acts 2:41).
- **Third**, the pastors and elders of the church are to take heed to the flock of God (e.g., Acts 20:28). It is assumed that these leaders had no doubt as to whom those people were. In fact, there were even lists of Christian widows eligible for the church's benevolent ministry (1 Timothy 5:9).
- **Finally**, church discipline is described as effecting a change of status and relationship between an unrepentant individual and the Church — even the Lord (1 Corinthians 5).

Furthermore, the basic New Testament metaphors that Jesus and his apostles used to describe the intimate union between Jesus Christ and his Church teach us the necessity and nature of true biblical membership in the Church: vine and branches (John 15), shepherd and sheep (John 10), temple and stones (1 Peter 2), body and members (Romans 12), as well as bride and husband (Ephesians 5).

Because of this the members of Christ and his Body are to *"maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:3), to submit to the doctrine and discipline of Christ's Church (Hebrews 13:17), to care for the poor and to support the ministry of the Word (1 Corinthians 9; Galatians 6:6ff), and to serve in the Church (Ephesians 4:12, 16; 1 Corinthians 12:7, 27).

Despite the lack of confidence in the visible Church in our land in our time, which is understandable given its current situation, our forefathers, in a worse time than ours, had the highest confidence in the Church to nourish the children of God and to be the means through which salvation would be given to the world because it was Christ's Church, and not any man's church.

D Hyde

© 2011
www.christianstudylibrary.org