

Church Membership and Choosing a Church

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Introduction

We live in a time in which many professing Christians regard church membership as optional. They consider church membership as something that men devised for pragmatic reasons; that it has nothing to do with the requirements of Scripture. One often hears statements and questions such as: “Where does the Bible say ‘Go join the local church?’” “Church membership is legalistic. It was devised so that corrupt church officials could gain control over the people.” “I’m a Christian but I don’t believe in the institutional church.” “The institutional church is totally corrupt so I worship at home with my family.” “My relationship to God is a very private and special matter. It is between me and my Savior. I don’t want to impede this relationship by joining a church with all its problems.” “I’m part of the invisible church. Therefore, there is no need for me to join the visible local church.” “The local church is a good thing, but joining it is a purely voluntary affair and I am simply too busy to get involved with it right now. Maybe I’ll join when I’m not so busy.” Is membership in a local church purely voluntary like joining the Lion’s Club or the Boy Scouts? Is it something men devised to lord it over other men and gain control over their money? No. Absolutely not! The biblical evidence for church membership is abundant and overwhelming.

Before we consider the biblical arguments for church membership let us first consider some of the reasons why so many people who claim to be Christians have such a negative, unbiblical view of church membership. First, many churches have not instructed people regarding this issue and many churches themselves regard membership as optional. When churches do not instruct Christians on this subject or themselves hold to an unscriptural view then one should not be surprised when ignorance and unbiblical views abound.

Second, industrial and post-industrial social trends coupled with American views regarding individualism have contributed to the atomization of society. Adults spend most of their waking hours away from home and community at the corporation. Americans move often and thus many times cannot set down strong roots in a community or kindle long term personal relationships.

Third, many people have had bad experiences with church officers who were heretical, arbitrary and dictatorial toward their members. Most churches today teach rank heresy from the pulpit (e.g., Romanism, Arminianism, the Charismatic movement) and are legalistic regarding ethics. When arbitrary, unbiblical demands are made by pastors and elders (such as don’t drink alcoholic beverages, don’t eat meat on Friday, don’t grow a beard or wear a colored shirt, etc.) then naturally some people are turned off to the idea of church membership altogether. The

solution however is not to throw the baby out with the bath water but to join a biblical church. That is, a church that strictly holds to Sola Scriptura, where church officials acknowledge that they only have authority delegated by Christ and thus can only declare and command what is revealed in the Scripture. No pastor or elder has the authority or right to impose laws upon, or exact obedience from, a member without scriptural proof to back it up. This point is very important for it is denied by Romanists and many so called Fundamentalists and Charismatics. When this author was an Arminian Charismatic heretic in the 1970's, he attended churches where the pastor and elders would tell church members: where to work, who to marry, what kind of car to buy, where to live, what to wear and so on. Antinomianism almost always leads to legalism and tyranny.

Fourth, many people reject church membership because they don't want to do anything that interferes with their autonomy. Many people are materialistic, hedonistic, self-centered, selfish and therefore do not want any form of authority over them or any responsibility towards others. This selfish sinful attitude exhibits itself in different ways. Some people who claim to be Christians never attend church at all and spend the Lord's day like any atheist. They can be found at the shopping mall, beach, park, restaurant, or football game; at home watching TV; or sleeping in. For them Christ is a fire escape from hell and no more. The truth is, such people are lovers of self rather than lovers of God. They are rank idolaters living in self-deception. Another group of people who profess Christ go to church sometimes, however, they like to church-hop. They go to different churches like a person who visits different restaurants for variety. Such people like to remain strangers. They want to remain anonymous in order to live autonomously. For them, church is a spectator sport. They church-hop to ease their consciences and do so to avoid a commitment to other professing Christians. They contribute nothing to the local church. They are just passing through. Because no one really ever gets to know these church hoppers they are never challenged regarding immoral behavior or heretical doctrine. There is another group of people who do regularly attend a local church yet who refuse to join and to participate heartily in mutual fellowship, aid and edification. This group also likes to retain autonomy in their lives. They do not want to be under the authority of elders. They want to avoid the personal responsibility that church membership entails. Such people often have a record of poor church attendance. People who ignore the corporate element of the church, who dislike authority and corporate responsibility are missing church for sinful, self-centered reasons. God's word strongly condemns all the unscriptural views regarding church membership enumerated above.¹ (If your behavior is similar to what has just been described you especially need to carefully study the arguments for church membership below, for they prove that you are in rebellion against God).

¹ One must keep in mind that simply joining a church does not in itself solve all difficulties and it in itself does not prove that a person is a sincere Christian. There are many people who join a church yet who do not take the covenant of church membership seriously at all. They rarely attend church, they don't tithe and they seem unconcerned about fellowship, prayers and so on. However, at least such people can receive shepherding, counsel and discipline if necessary. There are people who outwardly say and do all the right things yet who do not have saving faith. However, since only God knows the heart, church members can only be disciplined for outward, discernable violations of Scripture.

While there are various reasons why many professing Christians have a negative and unbiblical view of church membership there is no excuse for refusing to be identified with the local (Bible-believing and truly Reformed) visible church.

The Biblical Evidence for Church Membership

When examining the biblical evidence for church membership one must keep in mind that there are no explicit commandments in the Bible which says, “Go join the local church.” But, even though there are no explicit statements on this issue in Scripture, church membership is clearly inferred from other biblical doctrines.

The first area of biblical teaching that infers church membership is church government. When Christ instituted the church He set up church officers and laws for the government of His church. The existence of ecclesiastical rulers, governors or overseers presupposes not only some sort of ecclesiastical power but also that there is a group of people to be governed. Jesus, who is the Good Shepherd of His sheep (cf. John 10:7-18), has placed under-shepherds over His flock for their protection and edification. “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away” (1 Pet. 5:1-4). “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that...administrations...” (1 Cor. 12:28). “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-12). “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops [literally overseers] and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). “From Miletus he [the apostle Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them...‘Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood’” (Ac. 20:17, 18, 28). Elders are appointed by the Father (1 Cor. 12:28), given to the church by the Son (Eph. 4:11-12), and made elders of the church by the Holy Spirit (Ac. 20:28).

Church elders (*presbuteroi*) or overseers (*episkopoi*) were the pastoral leaders of the various congregations. Elders were appointed in every church (Ac. 14:23; Tit. 1:3) and were lawfully ordained by the laying on of the hands of a presbytery (1 Tim. 4:14; cf. Ac. 13:2-3; Rom. 10:14-15). The two names, elder (bishop) and overseer (presbyter), are used synonymously in Scripture. (There are passages, however, that indicate some division of function between teaching and ruling elders [e.g., 1 Tim. 5:17]). The name elder denotes that a man must be a mature Christian (i.e., a man of experience and of biblical wisdom) in order to be a leader in the church. The designation overseer speaks of the type of work that elders do. They oversee the

flock. The office of elder was carried over into the church from the church government of the Old Testament synagogues. Christ made some changes in it to meet the needs of the New Covenant churches.

What needs to be noted is that elders had certain specific responsibilities that presuppose a group of church members who were under their care. One of their primary responsibilities was to rule, govern or lead the church. “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim. 5:17). “And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. Be at peace among yourselves” (1 Thess. 5:12-13). “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you.... Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:7, 17). Note that all these passages assume that a special relationship exists between church governors and the members of the churches that these men have a responsibility to shepherd. Are the elders responsible to look after the affairs of atheist pagans in their neighborhood? Is Paul urging Buddhists, Hindus, and other rank idolaters to submit to a local body of Christian overseers? No. Of course not! Unbelievers and professing Christians who are not members can ask the pastor and other elders for counsel and advice but such people are not under the elders’ authority and cannot be subject to discipline.

There are a number of statements in the above passages that presuppose a covenant of church membership. First, Paul is addressing “brethren.” While this word by itself does not prove church membership it at least proves that churches consist of professing Christians. Unbelievers and immoral persons who like to occasionally attend a church service are excluded.

Second, there are phrases that speak of a particular ecclesiastical authority over a specific group of people. Elders are “over you in the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:12). They “rule over you.... They watch out for your souls” (Heb. 13:7, 17). Church elders have a rule only over a set group of people. They “labor among you” (1 Tim. 5:17). That is they labor, rule over, watch out for people in their own congregation. Further, “they must give an account” before the Lord regarding their performance of oversight. Such specific statements render impossible the idea that elders rule over or watch out for everyone who walks in the door of a church or who casually attends here and there with no real commitment. A shepherd is responsible for his own flock, not for all the animals in the forest.

Third, the brethren are commanded to “obey those who rule over you, and be submissive” (Heb. 13:17). They are “to recognize” and “highly esteem” their own elders. Are Christians supposed to submit to anyone who claims to be a pastor or elder? Are they to submit to the heretical preachers on TV? Must they obey elders on the other side of the globe whom they do not know? Once again, apart from the concept of a church covenant in which professing Christians place themselves under the authority of elders in a local church, and are specifically under their care, these New Testament passages are incomprehensible and unworkable.

An ecclesiastical function that presupposes church membership is church discipline. Can a person be cast out of an organization without first joining and being a part of that group? Of course not! A person who is not a member of a church cannot be disciplined by that church. There are many passages which discuss church discipline that assume functioning church courts that have the ability to excommunicate church members who refuse to repent. Jesus taught that the church (i.e., the elders functioning as a church court) has the final determination in disciplinary matters. “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 18:15-18). Does the church court have an obligation to adjudicate between drug dealers in the inner city or in disputes between any others who just happen to come along? No. Of course not! Can the church court excommunicate anyone it pleases such as the Pope, a president, or an evil movie star? No. The church only has jurisdiction over professing Christians who are under its care. That is, professing Christians who have taken a vow of church membership.

The apostle Paul also taught the necessity of excommunication. After rebuking the Corinthian church for not disciplining a man living in gross sexual immorality he wrote, “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 5:4-5). Hodge writes, “The church was to be convened and Paul spiritually present. The sentence was not to be passed or executed in secret, but openly. It was to have all the solemnity of a judicial proceeding, and, therefore, the people were convened, though they were merely spectators.”² Paul’s explanation of why immoral persons are to be cast out of the church is most germane to our topic. Professing Christians who are immoral in behavior can corrupt a church as leaven permeates a lump of dough (1 Cor. 5:6-7). Believers are not to keep company with anyone who professes to be a Christian yet who leads an immoral lifestyle. Then Paul makes a clear distinction between the world and the church. “For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore ‘put away from yourselves the evil person’” (1 Cor. 5:12-13). The last phrase Paul uses is important for it is an expression taken from Deuteronomy (cf. 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21, 24; 24:7; in 17:12 a slightly different formula is used) which commands the covenant community to purge itself of evil. In every instance it appears (except 19:19), it follows with the death penalty. For Paul excommunication is the spiritual counterpart to being cut off (i.e., executed) from the people of

² Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974 [1857, 59]), p. 84.

Israel.³ With the New Testament excommunication, however, the cast-out person still has the opportunity open for repentance and reconciliation with the body of Christ. As the nation of Israel only had the opportunity to execute those who were members of the covenant nation, the church judicatory only has authority over members of the church.

Church discipline is not only the proper and necessary course of action toward immoral church members it also must be applied to church members who are divisive and/or heretical. Paul said, “Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned” (Tit. 3:10-11). The word translated divisive (*hairesitikos*) in this context (cf. v. 9) denotes a person who follows teachings and practices that are contrary to Scripture. Heretical teachers are divisive for they seek followers of their own perverted doctrines. Paul obviously is not referring to atheists and pagans but to people who are part of the church. Can a person cause schism in an organization that is not a unified body? Can someone divide that which is not first united? A church must protect itself against false teachers and schismatics by first a private warning and then if necessary an open trial and excommunication. Such men who refuse to heed the church court and repent are “self-condemned” (Tit. 3:11). They are sinners and wicked men (Mt. 18:17). The apostle John wrote, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 Jn. 10-11). “Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (Rom. 16:17). “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars” (Rev. 2:2).

Further evidence of church membership is found in 2 Corinthians where Paul (once again) used legal terms when he urged that church to receive a repentant excommunicated person back into full fellowship. “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him” (2 Cor. 2:6-8). This passage taken together with 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 gives us a glimpse of how a church court functioned in the first century. The apostles apparently acted as superintendents over particular groups of churches. When disciplinary cases came to their attention they acted with the local session of elders either in person or in spirit (1 Cor. 5:3). The church governors would meet with the whole church present and vote and pass judgment on the

³ The New Testament church is largely a continuation of the Jewish synagogue. Jewish synagogues met weekly and were ruled by a body of elders who had the power of excommunication. Jesus warned the apostles that they would be “put out of the synagogues” (Jn. 16:2) for their adherence to the truth. The story of the blind man in John 9 also shows this authority, “His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was the Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue” (Jn. 9:22). The Jewish leaders exercised this authority illegitimately because they acted contrary to Scripture. Jesus referred to any synagogue that persecuted His church as “a synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9). This author has purposely avoided proofs from the Old Testament in order to keep this a small booklet. A lengthy chapter could be written proving the necessity of church membership from the Old Testament alone.

offending party. Paul's statement that "this punishment which was inflicted by the majority" indicates that there was not unanimous support for the action of session. This passage reveals that ecclesiastic judicial proceedings not only served to purge the church of evil (i.e., protect the flock from immorality and heresy), but also served the purpose of winning the erring person back to Christ. Hodge writes, "The great majority of commentators, therefore, understand the passage to mean that Paul did not wish the excommunication to be continued any longer. As it had produced its desired effect [repentance], he was willing that the offender should be restored to the communion of the church. The whole passage indicated that Paul was more lenient [i.e., forgiving] than the church, for he exhorts his readers not to be too severe in their treatment of their offending brother."⁴ The legal nature of this passage is also evident in verse 8 where Paul says, "Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him." The verb *kurosai* (translated as reaffirm, ratify, or confirm) in Greek society (and Galatians 3:15) had a legal connotation. "Hence the likelihood that the use of this term here implies an official or formal ratification of the Corinthians' love by resolution of the congregation or church to re-admit the repentant to their fellowship."⁵ This word implies an official act whereby the penitent is re-admitted to all the privileges of church membership.

The study of church government and discipline proves that the New Testament church was not a mere voluntary association, or merely a loose aggregation of individuals. It was created by divine institution with a definite form of church government and strict rules of discipline for its own propagation and preservation. The New Testament speaks of pastors (Eph. 4:11), shepherds of the flock (Ac. 20:28), teachers (1 Cor. 12:28), and elders, overseers or governors (1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Tim 3:2; 5:17). There are also deacons (Ac. 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8-13) who handle the financial affairs of the church. Elders are responsible to teach (Eph. 4:11-12), exhort (1 Tim. 6:2), admonish (1 Thess. 5:12-13), "rebuke with all authority" (Tit. 2:15), and preach (2 Tim. 4:2). Church leaders receive their authority from Christ to edify the church and not to destroy it (2 Cor. 10:8). As guardians of the flock they have a responsibility (after following the necessary levels of admonition) to "reject" (Tit. 3:10), "put away from" the church (1 Cor. 5:13) and regard as "heathen" (Mt. 18:17) those who do not repent of immorality and heresy. They also must re-admit into church membership all those who repent (2 Cor. 2:6-8). Calvin writes, "We see how God, who could in a moment perfect his own, nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church. We see that all are brought under the same regulation, that with a gentle and teachable spirit they may allow themselves to be governed by teachers appointed to this function."⁶

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 412. R. C. H. Lenski notes both the universality and judicial nature of Paul's statement, "*Ikanon* is neuter although the noun is feminine; this is due to the generalization expressed in 'such a one,' the predicate adjective referring not merely to this one case of penalty but abstractly to every such case, B. - D. 131. In view of Acts and Mark 15:15 *ikanon* may also be juridical" (*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1937], p. 882.).

⁵ Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle To The Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 67.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4:1:5, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 2:1017.

Ask yourself the following questions: “Am I under the authority of ecclesiastical rulers? Is it possible for me to be excommunicated from a church? Is there a group of elders that I ‘recognize,’ ‘highly esteem,’ ‘obey’ and ‘submit’ myself to?” If I have a problem with dangerous heresy or gross immorality is there a church court over me that will hold me accountable to God’s holy word? If I have a conflict with another confessing Christian that cannot be resolved, is there a church session (or consistory) that I can appeal to? The New Testament assumes that every Christian (under normal circumstances) should be able to say yes to every single one of these questions. Did you answer yes to all the questions? If not, then why not? If the problem is simply one of ignorance then now that you know what the Bible says it is time to repent. If you know the truth regarding this issue yet still refuse to obey the clear teaching of the Scripture then you need to ponder these questions. If a person who claims to be a Christian knows a requirement of Scripture yet continually refuses to submit himself to Christ’s word, has that person really submitted himself to Jesus as Lord? Does such a person have any reason to believe that he is really even a Christian at all? “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him” (1 Jn. 1:3-5).

The Nature of the Church

Further proof of church membership can be ascertained by a brief, general study of the New Testament church. When one examines the scriptural meaning, usage and significance of this term one will see that joining a church, becoming a disciple and committing oneself to the service of other believers is not optional but necessary.

The Greek word (*ekklesia*) translated church was originally used in ancient Greek society to describe a group of citizens called out from ordinary activities into an assembly or congregation to discuss public affairs (cf. Ac. 19:39). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint or LXX) this same word is used for religious, civil and even profane assemblies (cf. Ex. 12:3, 19; Num. 16:2, Ps. 26:5). When used in a religious sense in the LXX, for Israel, it denoted that Israel had been chosen by God and called out of the nations to be God’s own special possession, His own covenant people. The New Testament religious meaning denotes “an assembly of men called out of the mass of the human race by the preaching of the gospel to constitute a society of believers; or the mystical body of Christ, into which no one is received unless called.”⁷

Because many professing Christians are fond of claiming to be part of the universal church while rejecting the necessity of being a member of the visible church, a brief discussion of the two principle New Testament usages of the word church are in order. The first usage refers to what theologians refer to as the invisible church. This terminology refers to the whole company of God’s elect, irrespective of time and place. The term invisible is used because there

⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 3:6.

are multitudes of saints in heaven and in far off parts of the globe of which one cannot see. Any person throughout the whole history of mankind who has been, or who is, or who will be saved by Christ is part of the invisible church. There are a number of scriptural passages which speak of the church in this manner. “Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body.... Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it” (Eph. 5:23, 25; cf. Mt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22, 23; 3:10, 21; Col. 1:18, 24).

The second and most common usage of the term *ekklesia* refers to the visible church. The visible church “consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children.”⁸ Thus the term even encompasses all those believers who because of extraordinary circumstances such as persecution, wide-spread apostasy and so forth, are not able to join a local Bible believing Reformed church. The thief on the cross did not become baptized and join the church in Jerusalem because he did not have the opportunity to do so. Yet he was a genuine Christian and was part of the visible church. One must avoid the Romanist error of asserting that apart from the institutional church there can be no salvation. According to the older Roman Catholic dogma, outside of the papal church there is no possibility of salvation. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, outside of the church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. This means that under normal circumstances every professing Christian should be a member of a local church.

When the New Testament discusses the visible church it usually refers to a visible assembly of saints who have been called out of the world by the gospel, who profess belief in Christ, and who meet and work together as a body. The most common use of the word *ekklesia* in the New Testament denotes a society of professing Christians who constitute a local church that meets in a particular location (Ac. 5:11; 11:26; 1 Cor. 11:18; 16:19; Rom. 16:23; Gal. 1:2; 1 Thess. 2:14; Col. 4:15; Phm. 2; Rev. 1:11, 20; etc.). Sometimes the term denotes a whole group of churches (Ac. 8:3; 15:22; Gal. 1:13). At other times it denotes the whole visible church—the body of Christ throughout the world (1 Cor. 10:32; 11:22; 12:28). Although the invisible and visible church should be viewed as two aspects of the one church, one must keep in mind that there are some important differences. For instance, the invisible church contains only the elect (i.e., genuine believers) while the visible church contains genuine Christians and hypocrites or false professors. Since elders cannot see into a person’s heart they must make decisions regarding communicant membership on the basis of a credible profession of faith. Hodge writes, “The truth also that since the church is rendered visible by the profession and outward obedience of its members; and since no class of men are ever endowed with the power of discriminating with absolute accuracy the genuineness of Christian characteristics, it necessarily follows that a credible profession, as presumptive evidence of real religion, constitutes a person a member of the visible church. By a credible profession is meant a profession of the true religion sufficiently intelligent and as sufficiently corroborated by the daily life of the professor to be credited as genuine. Every such profession is grounds for the presumption that the person is a member of the

⁸ Westminster Confession, 25:2.

true church, and consequently constitutes him a member of the visible church, and lays an obligation upon all other Christians to regard and treat him accordingly.”⁹

When one examines the visible church in the New Testament one will note that participation in the local visible church is assumed throughout Scripture. In the Great Commission the apostles and all ministers are commanded to make disciples through baptism and teaching (Mt. 28:19-20). A disciple is someone who believes in Christ, who has made a commitment to a church and placed themselves under the authority and teaching of one of Christ’s under-shepherds. There is no such thing as a disciple who refuses to be under ecclesiastical authority and instruction.

In the book of Acts people who believed in Jesus were added to the church. “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.... And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Ac. 2:41, 47). Does this mean that such people were added to the invisible church and went about life as before, except now with a private commitment to Jesus? No. They became part of the Jerusalem church and submitted themselves to the apostles. “And they [those added] continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Ac. 2:42; cf. 2:44, 46, 47). In Acts 16:5 we are told specifically that individual churches increased in number daily. “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.” There can be no question regarding the fact that these were visible local congregations.

Another passage that points to a real commitment to the visible church is found in Acts 5. “And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon’s Porch. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (Ac. 5:12-14). The phrase “none of the rest dared join them” (vs. 13) indicates in context that there were two classes of people. There were those who admired the apostles from a distance and there were those who joined themselves to them. In the book of Acts there was a group of believers who were set apart from the general public, who were called disciples (Ac. 6:1, 2, 7), who submitted themselves to apostolic doctrine (Ac. 2:42) and discipline (Ac. 5:2-11; 15:6-29). These believers or disciples chose or elected church officers (Ac. 6:5) who were then ordained by the laying on of hands (Ac. 6:6). In the apostolic church there was more to being a Christian than having a private personal relationship with Christ. Those people who believed in Christ were baptized (Ac. 2:38, 41; 8:38; 9:18; 10:47; 16:33), were added to the visible church (Ac. 2:41) and were joined to Christ’s under-shepherds (Ac. 5:13).

In the New Testament there are designations of the church that emphasize its corporate nature. The Gentile believers in the Ephesian church are called “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). The church is a family, a spiritual brotherhood that is holy, intimate, tender and full of mutual compassion and concern. Christians are especially to do good “to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). “Beloved, if

⁹ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958 [1869]), p. 313.

God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 Jn. 4:11). The saints of God are described as living stones that are united together in a single building of God, “the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:21-22).

Many professing Christians today think that membership in the universal church precludes the need for membership in the local church. The apostle Paul, however, takes the doctrine of membership in the universal church—the one “body of Christ” and uses it to spur believers to a greater commitment, unity and love toward their brethren at the local level. To the local church at Corinth, which was having problems with unity and self-centeredness among the brethren, Paul wrote, “Now you are in the body of Christ, and members individually” (1 Cor. 12:27). Individually considered, believers are members of Christ’s body. The church viewed as a unity, as a whole collectively is the body itself. In the section beginning at 1 Corinthians 12:12, Paul uses the metaphor of the body and the many parts of which it consists (e.g., ear, foot, eye, hand, etc.) to show the Corinthian church the need for unity (1 Cor. 12:18), and the need to care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25). All the members of the church are mutually dependent. Every member is to selflessly dedicate his or her talents to the body as a whole.

After beginning a section on proper Christian behavior and service Paul wrote, “For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (Rom. 12:4-5). Once again, Paul uses this designation to teach individual churches of the need for unity and harmony. The variety of gifts that Paul lists as necessary for the spiritual health of the body all come to expression in the local visible church. The different gifts and functions are used in the local covenant community. These diverse functions are interdependent. Therefore they presuppose a commitment of believers in a local area to one another. They assume a covenant of church membership. Christians are not given particular gifts and functions to wander about as nomads or to keep to themselves in isolation but to edify a local body of believers. Thus, the church is rightly called “the communion of saints.” Calvin writes, “It is as if one said that the saints are gathered into the society of Christ on the principle that whatever benefits God confers upon them, they should in turn share with one another.... So powerful is participation in the church that it keeps us in the society of God. In the very word ‘communion’ there is a wealth of comfort because, while it is determined that whatever the Lord bestows upon his members and ours belong to us, our hope is strengthened by all the benefits they receive.”¹⁰

Paul also discusses the necessity of an active, diversified congregational life in the epistle to the Ephesians. He says that Christ is the head of the church “from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:16). “The church is figuratively a body composed of many joints or members; and, literally it is a company of believers intimately united with each other.”¹¹ Calvin writes regarding

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:1:3, 2:1014.

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964 [1856]), p. 173.

verse 16, “There are three things here which deserve our attention. First is what has now been stated. All the life or health which is diffused through the members flows from the head; so that the members occupy a subordinate rank. The second is, that, by the distribution made, the limited share of each renders the communication between all the members absolutely necessary. The third is, that, without mutual love, the health of the body cannot be maintained. Through the members as canals, is conveyed from the head all that is necessary for the nourishment of the body. While this connection is upheld, the body is alive and healthy. Each member, too, has its own proper share,—according to the effectual working in the measure of every part.”¹²

No wonder Paul assumed that Christians will “come together as a church” (1 Cor. 11:18). Why? Because believers are to “consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another” (Heb. 10:24-25). “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor. 1:10; cf. 3:3). Once you are truly convinced that God is the common Father of all believers and that Christ is our common head and that Christians are to be united in brotherly love, then you will not refuse to share your gifts and express your love with a local body of believers.¹³

Why does Paul often emphasize the fact that Christ’s church is an organic body with multiple parts that need to function in harmony for the greater good of the whole? One reason is that Christians are sinners. Believers must continually contend with indwelling sin. God’s people need to put off sinful autonomy. The essence of rebellion toward God is to be one’s own god determining for oneself what is good and evil (Gen. 3:5). Division and disunity in the body of Christ are the results of autonomy in doctrine (which leads to various heresies) and autonomy in behavior (sinful deeds).¹⁴ Paul’s teaching on the organic nature of the body of Christ strongly condemns the sinful, spiritual individualism that is so popular today. Many people do not want to be under a spiritual authority and they do not want any spiritual responsibilities toward others. Thus, they designate themselves the sole authority in ecclesiastical matters and develop a hyper-personalistic version of the church. For them the church is not a body with cooperating parts that function together for the good of the whole. Rather it is viewed as a bunch of isolated atoms that bump into one another once in a while. Jesus, however, spoke of the communion of saints in a manner that proved that the church was a discernable community known by its acts of love for each other. He said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have

¹² John Calvin, *Commentaries On The Epistles Of Paul To The Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 21:28.

¹³ *Ibid.* 2:1015.

¹⁴ Human autonomy and the flight from personal responsibility express itself in a number of different ways. There is the chaos of hyper-personalism and there also is the blind submission to a cult leader whether political or religious. Many people in dictatorial-tyrannical cults find comfort in the fact that they are no longer required to think for themselves. They are told what to eat, wear, think and so on. In cult-like groups and tyrannical political cults, autonomy is merely shifted to another authority—a false god, in order to escape God and His call to dominion under Christ.

loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:34-35).

Thus far we have noted that the church is both an institution and an organism. The church as an institution has a set form of government (with church officers that have ecclesiastical authority) and has specific ordinances ordained by God. The institutional aspect of the church was put in place by Christ Himself and should never be considered a pragmatic afterthought on the part of the disciples. “God has commanded his people to organize themselves into distinct visible ecclesiastical communities with constitutions, laws and officers, badges, ordinances and discipline, for the great purpose of giving visibility to his kingdom, of making known the gospel of that kingdom, and of gathering in all its elect subjects. Each one of these distinct communities which is faithful to the great King is an integral part of the visible church.”¹⁵

The church as an organism consists of all its members who are obligated to use their God-given talents and abilities for the mutual edification of the body. A Christian’s life in the body comes to expression primarily in the local visible church. Church members met together (Ac. 1:13-15; 2:1; 4:31; 11:26; 20:7ff.; 1 Cor. 11:18; 14:19, 28, 35; Rom 16:5; Heb. 10:25, etc.), prayed with and for one another (Ac. 1:14; 12:5; Rom. 12:12; 15:30; Col. 4:2, 3, etc.), fellowshiped together (Ac. 2:42; 2 Pet. 2:13; 1 Jn. 1:3, 7; Jude 12), gave money (i.e., tithed) to pay the pastor’s salary and to help poor believers (Ac. 2:44-45; 6:1-6; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 9:4-14; 2 Cor. 9:1-15; Gal. 2:10; Jas. 2:15-16), assisted poor orphans and widows (1 Tim. 5:3, 16; Jas. 1:27), admonished one another (Rom. 15:14; 2 Thess. 3:15; Col. 3:16), loved one another (Rom. 12:10; 2 Cor. 2:8; 8:7, 8, 24; Gal. 5:6, 13, 14, 22; etc.), met for public worship (Ac. 20:7; 1 Cor. 14:23, 26, 34, 35, etc.), participated in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:18-34, etc.), submitted to the elders of the church (Heb. 13:7, 17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13), and listened to the preaching of the word (Rom. 1:15; 1 Cor. 15:11-14; 2 Tim. 4:2, etc.). The church as an institution and organism on earth are co-ordinate. Under normal circumstances both these aspects of the church were never to operate independently. The various gifts, functions, services, meetings and so forth that took place were under the oversight of the church pastor and elders.

The oversight of the elders over the local church is not an arbitrary or dictatorial rule that is commonly found among pagans, cults and false religions. Rather it is a humble, loving oversight of a servant. It is an oversight that is supposed to take place according to the strict parameters of God’s word. Samuel Miller writes, “And, as all the power of the Church is derived, not from civil government, but from Christ, the almighty King of Zion; and as it is purely spiritual in its nature and sanction; so the power of Church Officers is merely ministerial. They are, strictly, servants, who are to be governed, in all things, by the pleasure of their employer [Jesus Christ]. They have only authority to announce what the Master has said, and to decide agreeably to that will which he has made known in his word. Like ambassadors at a foreign court, they cannot go one jot or tittle beyond their instructions. Of course, they have no right to set up a law of their own. The Bible is the great Statute-Book of the body of which we

¹⁵ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p. 312.

speak; the only infallible rule of faith and practice. And nothing can be rightfully inculcated on the members of the Church, as truth, or demanded of them, as duty, but that which is found in that great charter of privileges as well as the obligations of Christians.”¹⁶

A brief examination of the church as an organic body has shown that being a Christian carries with it certain duties or responsibilities. These duties do not contribute one iota to a person’s salvation. However, a person who truly believes in Christ will obey His commandments. Once you believe in Jesus and are saved solely by Him and His merits, you are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19; Ac. 2:38, 41; 8:12, 38; 10:47, 48; 16:15, 33; 18:8, etc.); you are to publicly confess your faith in Christ before others (Mt. 10:32; Rom. 10:9; Rev. 2:13); you are to join the visible local church (Ac. 2:41, 47; 5:12-14; 16:5; 1 Jn. 1:19) and place yourself under the authority of a body of elders (1 Pet. 5:1-4; 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7, 17); and you are to actively commit yourself to the service of the body of Christ—the local visible church (Ac. 2:42-47; 4:32, etc.). All of the duties noted above are strictly required by Scripture. Thus, they are not voluntary for professing Christians but are moral obligations. There is overwhelming biblical evidence that living the Christian life involves much more than showing up at a church service once in a while as a spectator.

Given the scriptural information regarding the church noted above you need to ask yourself some soul-searching questions. “Am I actively committed to a local body of believers? Am I supporting a local church with my tithes and offerings? Am I serving a local body of believers with my prayers? Am I actively engaged in the mutual care, admonition and edification of Christ’s body? Am I living the lifestyle of self-sacrificial love toward a body of believers? Am I part of an organic church body or have I isolated myself from the visible church? Have I been added to a local visible church? Have I joined myself to godly qualified teachers of the word? Am I a member of a local visible church?” If you answered no to these questions then you need to ask yourself why. If the reason was simply a matter of ignorance then, now that you know the truth it is time to remedy your situation. If you do not care what the Bible says and refuse to obey the clear teaching of Scripture you need to realize that at best you are a seriously backslidden Christian who is in rebellion against God; and at worse you are not even a Christian at all but an unregenerate heathen living in self-deception. In either case you need to “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Lk. 3:8). Are not newborn babes supposed to desire the sincere milk of the word that they may grow thereby (1 Pet. 2:2)? Are not people who are saved and adopted into God’s own family supposed to love the brethren (1 Jn. 4:7-12)? Are not Christians supposed to regard other believers as more important than themselves (1 Cor. 10:24; Phil. 2:1-4)? Are not believers

¹⁶ Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1987 [1832]), p. 25. “But Jesus called them to Himself and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many’” (Mt. 20:25-28). “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-3).

supposed to come together as a church and exhibit unity (1 Cor. 11:18 ff.)? It is time to set aside your unbiblical sinful attitude toward church membership and join yourself to a solid, Bible believing, truly Reformed church.

What Church Should I Join?

Once the necessity of church membership has been established from Scripture the next logical question is, “What church should I join?” There are hundreds of different denominations. How do I separate the good from the bad? What denominations come closest to the scriptural ideal? These are good questions. The sole standard for determining the best church to attend is the Bible—the infallible word of God. Unfortunately many people approach church membership from a subjective, anthropocentric, humanistic perspective. When they consider which church to attend they ask themselves questions such as: “What church makes me feel good? What church can I find that is not going to challenge my worldliness? What church can I find that doesn’t condemn my sinful behavior? I want a church that doesn’t talk about that scary doctrine of hell. I want a church that accepts people for what they are, whether fornicators, adulterers, sodomites, etc. I want a church with a fun children’s program. Where can I find a church with a great rock band and an entertaining service?”

All serious professing Christians will reject the typical American hedonistic, self-centered approach to choosing a church and instead will search the Scriptures in order to see how God defines a true church. When we examine the Bible we will note that there is one primary mark of a true church and two other marks that are dependent on and naturally follow the first mark.¹⁷ The primary mark of a true church is the pure preaching and profession of the word. A true church must teach true apostolic doctrine. It must preach the pure doctrine of the gospel. The two secondary marks are the lawful administration of the sacraments and the proper exercising of church discipline. Why do we identify true apostolic doctrine or the pure doctrine of the gospel

¹⁷ Regarding the marks of the church in Reformed theology Berkhof writes, “Reformed theologians differed as to the number of the marks of the church. Some spoke of but one, the preaching of the pure doctrine of the Gospel (Beza, Alsted, Amesius, Heidanus, Maresius); others, of two, the pure preaching of the word and the right administration of the sacraments (Calvin, Bullinger, Zanchius, Junius, Gomarus, Mastricht, à Marck) and still others added to these a third, the faithful exercise of discipline (Hyperius, Martyr, Ursinus, Trelcatius, Heidegger, Wendelinus)” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941], p. 576). The Confession of Augsburg (article 7), the French Confession (article 28), the Confession of Saxony (article 11) and the confession of Württemberg (article 32) all list two marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the right use of the sacraments. The Belgic confession (article 29) and the Scottish confession list three: the pure preaching of the gospel, the lawful administration of the sacraments and the proper use of ecclesiastical discipline. Both of these confessions, however, give the preeminence to the first mark by saying that all things (including the sacraments and discipline) must be done in accordance with God’s word. The Westminster Confession (25:2) and the Larger Catechism (62) both wisely focus all attention on the one primary mark—the profession of the true religion (i.e., apostolic Christianity). Scottish theologians (when discussing what constitutes a true church) liked to make a distinction between the church as *to being* and the church as *to well-being*. A church such as the Roman Catholic Church could be called a church as to being because of the remnant of biblical doctrine and the true Christians in her midst, yet, be called a false church as to well-being because of apostasy in doctrine and worship.

as the primary mark of a true church? The first reason is that biblical teaching or doctrine is necessary in order to define the sacraments and their proper use, as well as define what is sinful and deserving of church discipline. If one is in a church in which true doctrine is believed and taught then the fruit of such a belief and teaching will be exhibited in the two other marks. A second reason is that a church which ceases to preach the true gospel immediately becomes a false church. But a church can exist for a time without the sacraments as was the case of the Israelite church which neglected circumcision in the wilderness for forty years (Josh. 5:4-7). Further, a church which corrupts discipline can exist for a time before it becomes totally apostate.

In our day, when doctrine is considered unimportant, when church growth, excitement and psychobabble is predominate, it is important that we clearly establish the first and primary mark (the pure preaching and profession of the word) from Scripture. There are numerous passages which support this point.

1. Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (Jn. 10:27). What sets the unbelieving Jews apart from Christ’s fold? It is their refusal to listen to, believe and obey our Lord’s teaching or doctrine. True saving faith in Christ cannot be divorced from a belief in Jesus’ teaching. To believe in Christ savingly is to believe in Him “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3, 4).

2. Note, how Christ defines a true disciple. “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.... He who is of God hears God’s words’” (Jn. 8:31, 32, 47). How do we know if professing Christians are true disciples? Jesus says that true discipleship manifests itself by perseverance in true doctrine.

3. Real Christians continue in Christ’s doctrine and thus live the truth. Sin no longer rules over them. “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words” (Jn. 14:23, 24). The apostolic church was noted for its continuance in the doctrine of the apostles. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Ac. 2:42). “[W]herever the doctrine of the apostles and the legitimate use of the sacraments and of prayers are, there the true church of Christ certainly is.”¹⁸

4. There are a number of passages that teach that believers are to distinguish between true and false teachers by a biblical examination of their doctrine. False teachers (and by inference false churches) can be discerned by comparing their doctrine to the word of God or the doctrine of Christ and the apostles. When Jesus said, “You shall know them [false prophets] by their fruits” (Mt. 7:16), He referred not only to immorality of life but also the perversion of doctrine (cf. Lk. 6:45). The apostle John wrote, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits [i.e., the teachers], whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come

¹⁸ Frances Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:89.

in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God” (1 Jn. 4:1-3).

In his second epistle John says that anyone who goes outside the boundaries of orthodox Christian doctrine does not have God. “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (2 Jn. 9-11). The true Christian religion is totally dependent upon an abiding adherence to, and trust in, the doctrine that Christ taught in His own ministry and that He continued to teach by His Spirit through the apostles. To forsake Christ’s doctrine is to forsake Christ Himself.

Given the strong statements against false doctrine above one should not be surprised that Paul pronounced an anathema against anyone who perverted the gospel of Christ. “But even if we, or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8). For Paul the standard by which true and false teachers are known is not apostolic succession, nor mighty miracles, or even the appearance of angelic beings but the doctrine of the gospel. The preaching of the true gospel makes a true church and the only way to determine what the genuine gospel of Christ is, is to look to the infallible word of God—the Scriptures.

5. The church of Christ is built on the foundation of divine revelation given by the New Testament prophets and apostles. “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:19-20). That Paul means New Testament prophets is evident from the context (cf. Eph. 3:4-5). The picture that Paul sets before us is that of a completed foundation upon which the church of Jesus Christ rests. But the church, unlike the foundation, continues to grow. The revelation is the definitive, authoritative and final explanation of the person and work of Christ. Thus, the true church can only stand upon true apostolic doctrine. Calvin writes, “But, as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows—just as a man’s life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart mortally wounded. And this is clearly evident from Paul’s words when he teaches that the church is founded upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself the chief cornerstone [Eph. 2:20]. If the foundation of the church is the teaching of the prophets and apostles, which bids believers entrust their salvation to Christ alone—then take away that teaching, and how will the building continue to stand? Therefore, the church must tumble down when that sum of religion dies which alone can sustain it. Again, if the true church is the pillar and foundation of truth [1 Tim. 3:15], it is certain that no church can exist where lying and falsehood have gained sway.”¹⁹

It is for this reason that Paul continuously exhorted believers to follow the doctrines that had been given unto them. “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:2:1, 2:1041-1042.

were taught, whether by word or our epistle.... But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us” (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6). “Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:16). “If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing.... from such withdraw yourself” (1 Tim. 6:3, 4, 5). “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13). “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). “But you have carefully followed my doctrine...you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them” (2 Tim. 3:10, 14). “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables” (2 Tim. 4:3-4). “Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict” (Tit. 1:9). “But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1). Turretin writes, “Now such is the preached and received word (1 Cor. 4:15; Eph. 2:19, 20; 5:26; 1 Pet. 1:23; Jam 1:8; Mt. 28:19, 20), which constitutes, conserves and nourishes the church so that, it being posited, the church is posited, and it being removed, the church is removed. Hence the removal of the candlestick or the ministry of the word draws after it the destruction of the church (Rev. 2:5); and the ceasing of prophecy implies the scattering of the people: ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish.’”²⁰

That the word of God teaches that a true church can only be founded upon the sacred Scriptures or more particularly the pure doctrines of Christ is very clear. No one of sound mind would argue that a society of people that denies Christ and His teachings is a genuine church of Christ. Many people, however, consider this subject (of what constitutes a real church of Christ) a difficult one, for there are literally hundreds of denominations, all of which (except perhaps radical modernists) claim to follow the pure gospel and the true doctrines of the apostles. Further, there are a number of questions that often are asked when this subject is considered. For example: “Are you claiming that a church and/or denomination must hold perfectly to every apostolic teaching before it can be a true church?” “Is it not impossible to have a totally pure church this side of heaven?” “Do we not read of churches in the New Testament that had doctrinal errors and ethical perversions that were still regarded as genuine congregations by the apostles?”

In order to deal with people’s concerns and questions regarding our topic we need to examine two different issues. First, what doctrines are so essential and foundational to Christianity that if they are denied or perverted they render a church false and dead? Second,

²⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:91.

when one examines different churches which are true, yet which follow errors that do not destroy the foundations of the faith, how does one determine what church to join?

When one considers what is essential to the existence of a church one must ascertain whether or not a church or denomination holds to all the doctrines that are fundamental to the faith. If a church denies any essential doctrines in its creed, confession, statement of faith and/or practice then its ministers do not have authority from Christ and are false prophets. Remember, the primary mark of a true church is the pure preaching of the gospel. Once the true gospel has been cast aside a true church no longer exists.

What are those doctrines that are essential to the existence of a church? First, we will consider those doctrines that virtually all professing Evangelical Christians agree are necessary to have a true church.²¹ Then, we will consider doctrines in which professing Christians do not agree.

Most Evangelicals acknowledge that the doctrines of the trinity, the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus, biblical inerrancy and salvation by grace alone are fundamental doctrines. When a church denies the doctrine of the trinity or the divinity of Christ, that church is labeled a cult. People are then warned to stay away from its teachers.

When churches deny biblical inerrancy (as the mainline Protestant denominations have done) they call our precious Savior a liar and destroy the very foundation of all biblical truth. The results are denominations that deny the virgin birth, the miracles of our Lord and the literal, historical bodily resurrection of Christ. All such denominations are apostate and wicked. All Christians who refuse to leave such a denomination are participants in its sins and are guilty of supporting antichrists. Paul says, “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord” (2 Cor. 6:17). “Having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away.... Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith” (2 Tim. 3:5, 8). Calvin writes, “[W]ho has without exception dared to call that assembly ‘church’ where the Lord’s Word is openly and with impunity trodden under foot? where his ministry, the church’s chief sinew, indeed its very soul is destroyed?”²² Gary North tells us what the true faith of modernism was and still is, “It was a faith in Darwinism evolution, historical relativism, progress through science, the benevolent State, and the benefits of getting one’s hands on other people’s money—through political force, deception, or both. Sharing this faith, modernists inside and outside the church repeatedly worked together to silence those Christians who challenged their claims of legitimacy, whether

²¹ Calvin writes, “The pure ministry of the word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist. The principle extends to the point that we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults. What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith” (*Institutes*, 4:1:12; 2:1025).

²² John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4:2:7; 2:1048.

ecclesiastical or civil.”²³ Christian liberalism is secular humanism masquerading as Christianity. Believers who refuse to separate themselves from such denominations are in gross rebellion against God.

There are also churches which openly deny the gospel of Jesus Christ such as the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that men are saved by faith and by the good works that are done as a result of grace. Romanists even anathematize anyone who holds to the biblical doctrine of justification. “If anyone says that men are justified either by imputation of the righteousness of Christ alone, or by the remission of sins alone, to the exclusion of the grace and love that is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit and is inherent in them; or even that the grace by which we are justified is only the favor of God—let them be anathema” (Trent, sess. 6, canon 11). The apostle Paul explicitly contradicts the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation. “A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal. 2:16; cf. Rom. 3:20-24, 28; Phil. 3:8-9, etc.). Turretin writes, “She [the Roman Catholic Church] is apostate and heretical, having failed from the faith once delivered to the saints and teaching various deadly heresies and thrusting them forward to be believed under the pain of a curse. Such are the doctrines concerning justification by works and their merit, human satisfactions and indulgences, transubstantiation, and the sacrifice of the Mass, sin and free will, sufficient grace, the possible observance of the law, the ecumenical pontiff and primacy of the pope.... She is idolatrous and superstitious, both with respect to the object which she worships and with respect to the mode in which she worships. With respect to the object, inasmuch as besides God (who as alone omniscient, omnipotent and best ought to be the sole object of worship and invocation), she venerates and adores creatures also which are by nature not gods (Gal. 4:8): as the blessed virgin, angels, defunct saints, the consecrated host, the sacrament, the cross, the pope, the relics of Christ and of the saints. With respect to the mode, in the making, worship and adoration of effigies and images, so solemnly prohibited by the law of God. And these things appear not from the private opinions of teachers, but from the public sanctions and constant practice.”²⁴ The Roman Catholic Church is not founded upon God’s word but upon human tradition. For centuries it persecuted, tortured and murdered by fire and sword God’s most holy saints. The antichrist of Rome is now only restrained by a loss of political power, yet he still with his heretical doctrines and abominable idolatries is leading multitudes down the broad path that leads to destruction. A church which sets aside essential Christian doctrines and replaces them with damnable heresies and which persecutes those who cling to the true doctrines of Christ cannot be called a true church of Christ!

We will now consider an area over which there is not agreement among current Reformed pastors and theologians—that is the discussion over whether or not Arminian churches

²³ Gary North, *Crossed Fingers: How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church* (Tyler, TX: Institute For Christian Economics, 1996), p. xxxv.

²⁴ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:123, 124, 125.

and denominations should be regarded as true churches of Christ.²⁵ Is Arminianism a genuine form of Christianity that has some deficiencies and errors that do not strike at the heart of the gospel? Or, is it a damnable heresy? Are the errors so fundamental that the true gospel of Christ is denied? Although it has been fashionable during the last one hundred years or so for Calvinistic pastors and writers to speak of Arminians as our brothers in Christ and to regard their churches as true churches of Christ, such speaking and thinking is not based on the teaching of Scripture or logic. Rather, such thinking is often based on sentiment, a desire to fit in with current popular opinions, a desire to appear loving and friendly and the fanciful idea that Arminians are really Calvinists at heart but don't really know it. It is true, however, that genuine believers can be found in Arminian churches (as also can be found in Romanist churches), but such people are saved because they believe the truth not because they adhere to Arminian falsehoods. People who really believe the tenets of Arminianism, who hate the true gospel (which has been nicknamed Calvinism since the Reformation) are not one wit closer to salvation than the rankest Romanists for both believe that salvation is achieved not by the grace of God alone but by a cooperative effort between God and man (synergism). Further, both assign to man the decisive factors in who is and is not saved.

Because many professing Christians will no doubt be shocked by the statements above, a very brief defense of these statements is in order. There are several reasons that Arminianism must be considered a damnable heresy. First, Arminians deny crucial aspects of God's nature. The Bible teaches that God is absolutely sovereign over creation and has total control over whatsoever comes to pass (Ps. 115:3; 136:6; Job 42:2; Dan. 4:35; Isa. 46:10-11). The Scriptures teach that Jehovah even has power over the human heart (Prov. 16:1, 9; 19:21; 21:1; Rev. 17:17; 2 Thess. 2:11-12; Rom. 9:18-21; Ex. 10:1, 10; Dt. 2:30; Josh. 11:19-20; Ezr. 1:1, 5; Jn. 12:39-40; Lk. 24:4; Ac. 16:14; Phil. 2:13). Arminians teach that God is not sovereign. They argue that God cannot control the human heart. To support their assertion Arminians must either deny God's omnipotence or His immutability. In other words they must either argue that God is finite and cannot carry out His decreative will or that God has denied Himself and somehow limited His own sovereign power. Both options are clearly heretical.

²⁵ The favorable attitude that is often exhibited among Reformed pastors and scholars today toward Arminians wherein their deplorable heresies are treated as trifles, where they are called our wonderful brothers in Christ and where church members are regularly transferred to Arminian churches is a result of the declension that occurred among Reformed churches primarily during the nineteenth century. There is a vast difference between the manner in which Puritans described Arminianism and the manner in which it has been described by many during the past one hundred and twenty years. Listen to how the puritan John Owen described Arminianism in 1642, "What benefit did ever come to this church by attempting to prove that the chief part in *the several degrees of our salvation is to be ascribed unto ourselves, rather than God?*—which is the head and sum of all the controversies between them and us.... Neither let any deceive your wisdoms, by affirming that they are differences of an inferior nature that are at this day agitated between Arminians and the orthodox divines of the reformed church. Be pleased but to cast an eye on the following instances, and you will find them hewing at the very root of Christianity...those I have produced are enough to make their abettors incapable of our church—communion.... We must not offer the right hand of fellowship, but rather proclaim, 'a holy war,' to such enemies of God's providence, Christ's merit, and the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit.... We see their own confessions; we know their acts, 'the depths and crafts of Satan'" ("A Display of Arminianism" in *Works* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967 (1642)], 10:6, 7).

Second, Arminians deny the effects of original sin. The Bible teaches that man (as a result of the fall) is depraved and totally unable to respond to the gospel without a prior work of sovereign grace. All men are dead spiritually (Eph. 2:1-5), hate the truth, hate Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:19-21), dwell in darkness (Jn. 1:4-5), have a heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19), are helpless (Ezek. 16:4-9), cannot repent (Jer. 13:23), are slaves of Satan (Ac. 26:17-18), and cannot see or comprehend divine truth (1 Cor. 2:14). Modern Arminians deny the plain teaching of Scripture by either holding to the old semi-pelagian notion that man is not dead but merely spiritually sick, or, by asserting (without any scriptural proof) that Christ's death somehow automatically counteracted the effects of the fall to the extent that now all unregenerate men are able to cooperate with grace. The whole point of denying man's spiritual inability is so that the "first and chiefest part in the work of their salvation may be ascribed unto themselves; a proud Luciferian endeavor!"²⁶ Calvin writes, "In order that these men may prove their carefulness to retain this part of doctrine concerning gratuitous justification unimpaired, they must first determine what man is capable of by himself. For in discriminating between the nature of man and the grace of God, the first thing in order is to see what belongs to the former as its own. Here I know not what mediators rise up, who, that they may slay pious souls while seeming to appease their opponents by equivocating subtleties, leave men freedom of will, though weak and damaged. In other words, they are liberal with what is not theirs, when they transfer to man that which belongs to the grace of God."²⁷

Third, Arminians deny the gospel of Jesus Christ. While they loudly proclaim that we are saved by God's grace alone they explicitly deny this truth in their doctrine of salvation. They do not believe that Christ's death actually saves anyone, but only that it makes salvation possible if men do the right thing and allow God to save them by accepting Christ. They explicitly reject the biblical doctrine of atonement, that Jesus Christ by His sinless life and sacrificial death perfectly satisfied God's justice, thus meriting and procuring all the saving graces: regeneration, faith, repentance, sanctification and glorification for the elect. Smeaton writes, "If we compare Arminian views with biblical teaching on the subject of satisfaction [i.e., atonement], we soon find that they can no more be harmonized than light and darkness; for, according to apostolic teaching, the deliverance follows the ransom. Thus the whole doctrine was put to hazard. It was held that the death of Christ only made God capable of reconciliation, while the actual reconciliation was left to men themselves working out their own salvation."²⁸

The Arminian view of salvation—which makes salvation a cooperative effort between God and man (synergism)—is not grace, as biblically defined. The moment man contributes something of his own to salvation, even if it is just one act of the will, grace is no more grace. Luther writes, "Granted that your friends assign to 'free will as little as possible,' nevertheless

²⁶ John Owen, "A Display of Arminianism" in *Works*, 10:13.

²⁷ John Calvin, "The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom and Reforming the Church" in *Selected Works*, edited and translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 3:243.

²⁸ George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement According to the Apostles* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988 [1870]), p. 538.

they teach us that by that little we can attain righteousness and grace; and that they solve the problem as to why God justifies one and abandons another simply by presupposing ‘free will,’ and saying: ‘the one endeavored and the other did not;’ and God regards the one for his endeavor and despises the other; and He would be unjust were He to do anything else!... They [the guardians of ‘free will’] do not believe that He intercedes before God and obtains grace for them by His blood, and ‘grace’ (as is here said) ‘for grace.’ And as they believe, so it is unto them. Christ is in truth an inexorable judge to them, and deservedly so; for they abandon Him in His office as Mediator and kindest Savior, and account His blood and grace as of less worth than the endeavors of ‘free will!’”²⁹ Arminians rob Christ of His glory by giving sinful men the most important role in salvation. They have turned their humanistic view of free will into an idol unto which all other biblical doctrines must bow.

If your Pastor is an Arminian and therefore says that Christ did not actually save a people unto Himself, that faith is not a gift of God,³⁰ that God does not irresistibly draw sinners unto Christ, that regeneration is God’s response to man’s act of faith, that Jesus died for everyone and that people go to hell only because they did not “make a decision” for Christ, that what separates the saved from the lost is not the efficacy of Christ’s death but man’s act of the will, then your Pastor is a dangerous heretic, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a false prophet. The apostle Paul said, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8).

Calvinism is simply a nickname for the gospel of Jesus Christ. They who hate and preach against it are opposing the gospel itself. Warfield writes, “The Calvinist is he who upholds with full consciousness that God the Lord, in his saving operations, deals not generally with mankind at large, but particularly with the individuals who are actually saved. Thus, and thus only, he contends, can either the supernaturalism of salvation which is the mark of Christianity at large and which ascribes all salvation to God, or the immediacy of the operations of saving grace which is the mark of Evangelicalism and which ascribes salvation to the direct working of God upon the soul, come to its rights and have justice accorded to it. Particularism in the saving process, he contends, is already given in the supernaturalism of salvation and in the immediacy of the operations of the divine grace; and the denial of particularism is constructively the denial of the immediacy of saving grace, that is of Evangelicalism, and of the supernaturalism of Christianity itself. It is logically the total rejection of Christianity.”³¹

²⁹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Cambridge, MA: James Clark, 1957), 262.

³⁰ One must be very careful when questioning Arminians regarding particular doctrines, for they often use common orthodox terms with underlying unorthodox meanings. For example, (according to Arminianism) salvation by grace alone doesn’t mean salvation by grace alone but salvation by grace and human effort (i.e., man’s act of the will activates a passive hypothetical grace). Likewise, the phrase “faith is a gift of God” (cf. Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29) if not simply denied is redefined to mean that every person in the world has this gift but they can choose to use it or reject it. Also, the phrase “justified by faith” to the Arminian really means “justified because of faith.” Justification (in the Arminian scheme) occurs because of man’s autonomous act of the will in response to God’s offer. Thus, faith is the ground or meritorious cause of regeneration and salvation.

³¹ B. B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 87.

If you believe in Christ's atonement, in God's sovereignty and immutability and man's depravity then why would you attend a church that denies such crucial doctrines? You have a moral obligation to flee from such a false church. Remember, the true church preaches the pure doctrine of the gospel. In Arminian churches men who preach the true gospel are fired, defrocked and even excommunicated. Jesus said, "Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (Jn. 18:37). "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own".... "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (Jn. 10:27). Earlier Jesus said, "And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (Jn. 10:4-5). Can a true church exist where the gospel is not only rejected but also driven out? Are church leaders who preach against the true gospel following the voice of the Good Shepherd?

Although Romanist and Arminian churches have mutilated and perverted some of the foundational doctrines and have denied the heart of the gospel they do retain some foundational doctrines such as the trinity and the divinity of Christ. However, when anti-Christianity is added to Christianity or when a deadly poison is added to one's food the result is still the death of the body. Turretin writes, "It is one thing to retain something of the true church; another to be the true church simply; as it is one thing for the body to have some sound parts, another for the body to be sound simply."³² Once again, are we saying that no true Christians exist in modernist, Romanist and Arminian churches? No, absolutely not! But if there are genuine believers in those churches it is only because they do not adhere to their church's damnable heresies, but rather cling to the true gospel. As Turretin says, "Although they remained in her bodily as to seat, still they did not remain in mind as to faith."³³ If you believe in Christ as He is revealed in the Scriptures and now understand that the church you are presently attending is an apostate, false church then leave that church immediately.³⁴ Only a fool would purposely subject himself and his family to heretical teaching. Only an immoral person would knowingly subsidize an evil false

³² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3:13. Calvin writes regarding the Roman Catholic Church, "To sum up, I call them churches to the extent that the Lord wonderfully preserves in them a remnant of his people, however woefully dispersed and scattered, and to the extent that some marks of the church remain—especially those marks whose effectiveness neither the devil's wiles nor human depravity can destroy. But on the other hand, because in them those marks have been erased to which we should pay particular regard in this discourse, I say that every one of their congregations and their whole body lack the lawful form of the church" (*Institutes*, 4:2:12, 2:1053). What Calvin says equally applies to all Arminian churches. As such churches institutionally are false and are led by false prophets, yet those who believe the true gospel in the midst of these false churches are genuine believers.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3:137.

³⁴ In order to keep this essay relatively short the author has considered only a few theological problems common among Evangelicals. When one examines what goes under the general term Evangelical today, one could name many other perversions of apostolic doctrine such as: Dispensationalism, Antinomianism, decisional regeneration, altar calls, the use of pictures of Christ, Christian-existentialism or the Charismatic movement, the celebration of pagan-papal holy days, man-centered entertainment style "worship," the widespread use of pop-psychology, Sabbath rejection and desecration, the gospel as a subjective acceptance of Christ in to the heart, legalism (e.g., don't drink alcoholic beverages), etc.

prophet with his title. “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord” (2 Cor. 6:17).

Having considered those churches which Christians must avoid we will now consider true churches of Christ. The true church cannot be identified as merely one specific ecclesiastical organization for there are many churches and denominations today that still are faithful to the fundamentals of apostolic doctrine. These are primarily the various Reformed ecclesiastical bodies that have not abandoned biblical inerrancy, the five points of Calvinism (i.e., the gospel) and which adhere to one or more of the Reformed confessions and catechisms (e.g., Belgic, Heidelberg, Dort, Westminster). Because of geographical separation and human sinfulness there is not an organic union of the various Reformed denominations at the present time. There are differences of interpretation regarding worship, church government and so forth that necessitate separation into different ecclesiastical bodies. However, many Reformed denominations have fraternal relations and all (in spite of sin and schism) are part of the visible church.

When considering a church one must keep in mind that we live in a time of general declension. Even in Reformed denominations and independent Reformed churches there are different degrees of faithfulness to God’s word, there are different degrees of declension and corruption and there are churches that are reforming while others are moving backwards. There are even different degrees of faithfulness in different congregations within a denomination. When choosing a church you should look for a Reformed church that is as close to the biblical standard as possible. If the Reformed churches in your area are corrupt and are totally unwilling to repent and reform, then you should be willing to move to an area that has a more pure, reforming church. This is a difficult subject because no church is pure. Every church has defects. All churches are made up of sinners. Yet, when churches obstinately depart from various important doctrines and cannot be won over to the truth through biblical means, Christians are justified in separating themselves from such an ecclesiastical body. However, they should do so “decently and in order.” They should transfer their membership to a reforming church.

Some Important Issues To Consider When Choosing a Church

1. One of the most important things (if not the most important) that God’s people are called to do is to worship God publicly as a corporate body every Sabbath. Jesus said that God is seeking true worshipers who will worship the Father in spirit and truth (Jn. 4:23). Thus, it is important to become a part of and support a church that adheres strictly to biblical worship. The scriptural law of worship (or the regulative principle of worship) is one of the pillars of the Reformed faith. However, at the present time many Reformed ecclesiastical bodies either ignore this principle, reinterpret it in a very loose manner or refuse to apply it to key areas of worship. The result has been the introduction of worship innovations that are not sanctioned by God’s word, such as, the use of uninspired hymns, musical instruments and the celebration of pagan-papal holy days (e.g., Christmas, Easter). There are Calvinistic churches that even use such things as drama groups, liturgical dance, rock bands and charismatic camp fire songs in public

worship. If (because of human innovations) you are unable to participate in public worship, then you should not join that church.

2. Another important thing to look for when choosing a church is the proper exercising of church discipline. A church or denomination which does not take church discipline seriously, which allows sinful behavior and false doctrine to function unimpeded in the body is heading toward apostasy. The study of church history is to a large extent a study of what happens to churches which refused to discipline false teachers. Because orthodox teachers could not maintain discipline, the Roman church was overrun by idolaters and merit mongers. Because discipline was not maintained by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., the church was infiltrated by Arminians and then taken over by modernists. Men who tolerate evil because of cowardice, or a false view of love, or a false understanding of ecumenicity are not fit to be pastors or elders. Further, men who rule arbitrarily as if authority originates from themselves instead of Christ and His word also are not qualified to govern Christ's people.³⁵ Do not submit yourselves to such men. Does this mean that church courts must function perfectly, or that elders do not sometimes make stupid mistakes? Of course not! But when dangerous doctrines are repeatedly and openly tolerated (e.g., theistic, evolution, woman elders, etc.) the writing is on the wall.

Virtually all Reformed churches today are deficient in certain areas. Even the apostolic churches that we read about in the Epistles and in Revelation had some serious problems with sin and doctrine. Although as church members we should not expect or demand instant sanctification, we do have a duty to strive for the reformation of the church. The best way to avoid schism and preserve the peace of the church is to diligently work for its purity both doctrinally and ethically. Leaving a church is a serious matter that should only occur after all attempts at reformation have failed. De Jong writes, "Although himself an ardent defender of discipline, Calvin warned that in certain instances where the church was in the process of reformation this third characteristic might still be sadly deficient. He counseled that believers should never separate themselves from a church which, though still far from ideal in its exercise of discipline, was making a valiant effort to reform and purify itself according to the word."³⁶ Further, we cannot expect a perfect church this side of heaven. Ridgeley writes, "It is, therefore, necessary that all the members of it embrace the true religion; and, in particular, that they deny none of those fundamental articles of faith which are necessary to salvation. It is not to be supposed that the members of any society have a perfect unanimity in their sentiments about all religious matters; for that is hardly to be expected in this world."³⁷ A person does not have to

³⁵ Thomas M'Crie writes: "Like shepherds of ancient Israel, they have scattered the flock by ruling over it 'with force and with cruelty' [Ez. 34:4]. Forgetting the nature and limits of the power with which they have been entrusted, and their own complaints against Papal and Prelatical usurpation, Protestant and Presbyterian courts have acted 'as lords over God's heritage,' trampled on the sacred rights of conscience, stripped the Christian people of liberties which their divine Master had conferred on them, and which they were in the undisputed possession of for several centuries after his ascension, intruded hirelings on them for overseers, and driven those who resist their arbitrary measures to seek the food of their souls in separate communions" (*Unity of the Church* [Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, 1989 (1821)], p. 39).

³⁶ P. Y. De Jong, *The Church's Witness to the World* (St. Catherines, ON: Paideia, 1960), p. 264.

³⁷ Thomas Ridgeley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993 [1855]), 2:17.

believe in a cappella Psalm singing to join a truly Reformed church. However, once joined, such a person is required to not spread unbiblical opinions in the church.

3. One should attend a church that has a biblical understanding and thus a biblical administration of the sacraments. There are a number of things to look for regarding the sacraments in a church. First, one should look for a church that defines the sacraments biblically. The Papal church teaches transubstantiation; that is, the bread and wine literally become Christ's flesh and blood. Such a view contradicts Scripture, denies the true human nature of our Lord and leads to the worship of the host which is rank idolatry. Lutheran churches teach consubstantiation, which says that Christ's real physical human nature is in, under and among the elements. This view has no support from Scripture, is absurd and implicitly denies the real humanity of Jesus. Most Baptist churches regard the Lord's Supper as a bare sign or a mere memorial and not as a means of grace. The Reformed view avoids the unbiblical absurdities of Romanism and Lutheranism and avoids the mere memorial view common among Baptists. It teaches that the Lord's Supper is a real means of grace whereby believers by faith commune with the whole Christ spiritually. As Hodge writes, "the virtues and effects of the sacrifice of the body of the Redeemer on the cross are made present and are actually conveyed in the sacrament to the worthy receiver by the power of the Holy Ghost, who uses the sacrament as His instrument according to His sovereign will."³⁸

Second, it is very important that the sacraments are never divorced from the preached word of God. They derive their meaning from God's word. Apart from the word they are bare rituals. Third, they are only to be given to properly qualified subjects. Baptism is for all believers and their children. Baptists ignore the clear teaching of Scripture that the children of believers are part of the visible church—the covenant people of God and thus are to receive the sign of the covenant (O. T.—circumcision; N. T.—baptism). The Lord's Supper is not to be handed out indiscriminately but is only given to communicant members of the church that are not under discipline. Fourth, they are to be administered only by lawful ministers of the gospel. Fifth, they are to be done in accordance with Scriptural example. The Lord's Supper is a meal and thus should take place around a table or tables. Practices such as coming to the front of the church and kneeling to receive the bread and wine are Romish superstitions.

Conclusion

Church membership is required by God. All professing Christians need to seek out and join a truly Reformed church that preaches the true gospel; that lawfully administers the sacraments; that exercises church discipline; and, that worships God in spirit and in truth. Being faithful to the requirements of Scripture in this area may necessitate moving to a new area. However, the benefits of fellowship, public worship and the means of grace far outweigh the

³⁸ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, 363.

inconvenience of relocation. May God enable us to be faithful to our covenantal obligation to serve the body of Christ and work for reformation in this time of apostasy and declension.

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