

A LILY AMONG THORNS

Timeless Truths for the Modern Church

“I believe in the communion of the saints.” – *Apostles’ Creed*

“I believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.” – *Nicene Creed (325 AD)*

“The marks by which the true Church is known are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.” *The Belgic Confession, Article 29 (1561 AD)*.

“The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect....The visible church, which is also catholic or universal...consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children...out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” *Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. XXV (1646 AD)*.

INTRODUCTION

The Song of Solomon is an intimate love song. As such it portrays in poetic language the mutual affection between a bridegroom and his bride. However, Christians over the years have recognized more than mere conjugal love in this book. Since the church is the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:32; Rev. 19:7) the Song’s imagery serves as a fitting description of the love Jesus has for *his* bride. Thus when the lover says of his beloved, “Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens” (Song 2:2), we hear the tender words of Christ to his church. When the beloved fancies herself as “a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys” (Song 2:1), we see how divine love elevates and ennobles the object of its affection. Yet, this lily—the beloved church of Christ—exits

among thorns. Indeed her beauty stands out among them in this world of sin and ugliness. But thorns are always growing, invading, and encroaching. They seek to subvert, compromise, or destroy. The church today is contending with a species of thorns which have mutated and adapted to our modern conditions. Their destructive influence is not always recognized until it is too late and the garden has been overtaken. Thus it is perhaps more critical than ever that we revisit the subject of the church, the bride of Christ, from a biblical perspective. It is our desire to sustain the beauty and growth of this lily; to see her stand out among the thorns and not succumb to them.

GLORIOUS THINGS

The church consists of the people of God in all ages. They are those who have held fast by faith to those divine promises which find their apex in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The church had its origins in the Garden of Eden with the promise of a deliverer (Gen. 3:15). It was saved from global destruction in an ark. It was given shape by a covenant made with Abraham and sustained with the law given on Mt. Sinai. The church existed through the period of the wanderings, the judges, and the kings—through the exile and return. And when most of its visible number rejected the Lord Jesus Christ at his coming, the Lord refreshed his church with the out-pouring of his Spirit upon a praying remnant on the day of Pentecost. That there is one church through the ages is *the* salient feature of the Biblical doctrine of the church. The church is not a New Testament invention or an after thought with God. It circumscribes all those whom our Lord has “bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Thus Israel of the old covenant is the church (Gal. 3:8-9) and the church of the new covenant is the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16; cf. Eph. 2:14-18).

This being the case we would expect to find references to the church in the Old Testament. Psalm 87 is one such text. Here the Psalmist mentions how the Lord “set his foundation on the holy mountain”, “loves the gates of Zion”, and speaks “glorious things” of the “city of God” (Psa. 87:1-2). Clearly these are

allusions to Jerusalem. But the Psalmist's interest is not a place but a people. To be sure the references have their origin in locations in and around Jerusalem. But they are used here as symbols of the people of God. They are old covenant references to the church of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews Mt. Zion is referred to as "the church of the first born" (Heb. 12:22-23). In this Psalm the church is envisioned as encompassing the nations for gentiles are found in her midst: "I will record Rahab [Egypt] and Babylon [Iraq] among those who acknowledge me—Philistia [Palestine] too, and Tyre [Syria], along with Cush [Ethiopia]—and will say, 'this one was born in Zion.'" She is also defined as embracing families for the children of believers are counted among her number: "Indeed, of Zion it will be said, 'This one and that one were born in her'....The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: 'This one was born in Zion'" (5-6). What's more, the church is portrayed as glorifying God for the living waters of gospel hope flow within her: "As they make music they will sing, 'All my fountains are in you'" (7). John Newton, the great hymn writer of the eighteenth century, certainly understood Psalm 87 in this way when he wrote his famous hymn about the church:

Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God;/he whose words cannot be broken formed thee for his own abode:/on the Rock of Ages founded, what can shake thy sure repose?/With salvation's walls surrounded, thou may'st smile at all they foes.

See, the streams of living waters, springing from eternal love,/well supply thy sons and daughters, and all fear of want removed:/who can faint, while such a river ever flows their thirst t'assuage?/grace which, like the Lord, the giver, never fails from age to age.

Savior, if of Zion's city I, through grace, a member am,/let the world deride or pity, I will glory in thy name:/fading is the worldling's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show;/solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion's children know.¹

¹ John Newton, "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken" in *Trinity Hymnal*. (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990).

But, the church today is facing pressure to reinvent itself. The so-called seeker movement has enjoyed impressive growth and popularity for several decades. But it has done so by trading its birthright for a mess of pottage. While admirably desiring to evangelize the lost, it has done so by rejecting its past and embracing, to the point of idolatry, methods rooted in modern management, marketing, and amusement instead of the Word of God.² The more recent emergent movement is rightfully troubled by these trends and seeks to recover a respect for the Christian heritage. However its approach is often like rummaging through an attic in search of discarded relics of church life and devotion from a bygone era. Thus far it has not shown adequate discernment regarding what needs to be recovered and what was legitimately discarded in the first place.³ Nevertheless, both movements desire a future for the church. However, one sees the way forward with a blind eye to the past; the other sees the way forward with an undiscerning eye to the past.

There is yet another movement that has been building momentum in recent decades. This movement sees the church's best hope found in recovering the thought and piety articulated so timelessly in the Protestant Reformation. In nineteenth and twentieth century America this movement fell on hard times as an emphasis on individual spirituality supplanted the importance of the church and its corporate spirituality so necessary in nurturing Christian growth.⁴ In the last thirty years or so there has been an explosion of interest by young men and women for churches that respect its heritage of expository Christ-centered preaching, God-

² For a critique of the church grow movement see: David Eby, *Power Preaching for Church Growth: The Role of Preaching in Growing Churches* (Christian Focus Publications, 1996); and *Modern Reformation Magazine*, Vol. 9, Number 3, May/June 2000 on "The Malling of Missions: How Suburban Values Control the Church Growth Movement."

³ For a preliminary critique of the Emergent Church see: D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); and *Modern Reformation Magazine*, Vol. 14, Number 4, July/August 2005 on "Faith a la Carte: The Emergent Church."

⁴ See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

centered worship, creedal and confessional summaries of doctrine, no nonsense celebration of the sacraments, and structures that reflect biblical government. This movement, holding tenaciously as it does to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice, has found kindred spirits in the Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and their descendants. Its interest is not to reinvent the church, but to recover the biblical pattern of the church rightfully understood by the Reformation, the early church, and the Bible. It seeks to be Reformed in its identity, yet always reforming according to the Word of God. It recognizes that many Protestants today possess an alarming ignorance of the church as historically understood.

The purpose of these meditations is to recover our lost language and to speak once again “glorious things” about the “city of God.” Here is the way our forefathers understood the church. We will look at the important biblical categories through which the church is to be comprehended. We will place back on the table those topics that have fallen from memory. We must recover the biblical idea of the church and reject all attempts to redefine or reinvent it for a modern age. The Bible sets forth a doctrine of the church that transcends time and place. This does not mean that it must look the same in every age or culture. But a church that is shaped by the Bible will disciple the nations as God intended.

THE CHURCH VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

Moments of great insight come only sporadically in our lives. We struggle to grasp heavenly mysteries only to find them slip from our grip. Laying hold of spiritual realities is like laying hold of a wisp of smoke. The trouble is we are by nature earth bound, living in the realm of the visible. We understand things we can see and touch. But the invisible is rarely something we experience. Jesus’ incarnation was the Father’s condescension in this regard. Thus St. John could say, “That which...we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word

of life” (1 John 1:1). Peter would simply say, “We were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16).

But since Jesus has returned to the Father’s right hand and no longer visibly walks among his people, does that mean that we are no better off than before? Is the Christian faith only to be concerned with things unseen? Do we swim in a sea of uncertainty regarding our place in God’s kingdom? As Jesus was preparing the disciples for his departure, Peter had *his* great moment of insight. They had left the noise and demands of public ministry and retreated to Caesarea Philippi. Here Jesus posed a question to the twelve: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13). After discussing among themselves and reciting several popular opinions, the Lord sharpened the question: “What about you....Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:15). With that Peter “awakened” and declared, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16).

Peter’s confession became *the* seminal moment for Jesus to reveal the visible reality that would carry on in his absence. This confession would be the basis for his *visible church* (Matt. 16:18). The church would bear the Savior’s delegated authority—the keys of the kingdom—and thus the very gates of hell would never prevail against it (Matt. 16:19). It would visibly represent Christ in his visible absence, not by delegating that honor, power, and prestige to one person, but through all those who profess faith in Christ—who like Peter, confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God—and their children. Christ the head would be invisible to the human eye, but his body would be visible for all to see (Eph. 1:22-23).

To be sure, “the Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim. 2:19) and not all those truly born of God are gathered into the visible fold. The church as God sees it is invisible to us. Yet it is the purpose of the church to make the invisible visible. The church is God’s answer to the invisibilities of his kingdom. To be sure, we do this imperfectly. No visible church is pure in its entirety. There are spurious confessions among adults (1 John 2:19), and children of

believers who have not yet professed their faith. Yet we treat all in the church with the judgment of charity, holding the gospel high in our midst and praying for each other that our hearts might be secured to his glory.

The church is fundamentally a visible entity. Every book of the Bible is written to and for the visible church. Its texts are to be publicly read and proclaimed in sacred assemblies. Every one who names Jesus as their own is to be publicly identified and received into membership by confession of faith (Rom. 10:9). They are to be separated from the world through the visible sign of baptism (Matt. 28:19-20). The early church meet regularly for preaching, prayer, and sacrament (Acts 2:42). Every promise in Scripture is given to the visible church and negligence or denial of these things can jeopardize one's continuance in the visible church (one cannot be excommunicated from an invisible organization). God's people are to hear the word, taste the bread and wine, and feel the water wash over them. What's more, the Lord has granted in his word provision for government through elders—men ordained to bear the keys of the kingdom. They are to receive and dismiss, shepherd and serve, teach and preach (1 Pet. 5:1-4). The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXV, Section 3, says of this visible church that,

Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.

What does this mean for those of us who follow Jesus? Simply this! Christ meets his people in the visible church. He manifests his glory on earth in the visible church. If we love Christ we are to love his visible church, for how can we say "I love God", and yet hate the people who make up the visible church (1 John 4:20). The visible church was *his* first love (Acts 20:28), even when that church had lost *its* first love for him (Rev. 2:4). It is in the visible church that we connect with the invisible realities of the universe. It is here that in some measure faith becomes sight (1 Cor. 13:12; 2

Cor. 5:7). Finally, we must be part of the visible church for this pleases our Lord and, despite its many imperfections, our union with her brings untold blessing to those who are nurtured in its fold.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH

I am often curious how my friends in other Evangelical churches view the basis of church membership. I will often ask, "On what basis are people received as members in your church?" Those who have ventured to think about it will usually answer, "Oh, they must be born again." This seems intuitively correct. However, I then will follow up with another question, "How do you know when a person is truly born again?" That question stops them dead in their tracks.

The problem they immediately recognize is that no one can see into the heart of another. No one can have *absolute certainty* about the spiritual condition of another. We can hear what a person professes. We can see how they live and judge whether it is consistent with the Word of God. But we cannot know with certainty what God alone knows.

When the Lord sent Samuel to anoint David as King to supplant the wicked King Saul, he reminded him, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). This is a statement of fact as well as admonition. By all appearances Saul started off well. But soon his true "colors" were revealed in persistent acts of disobedience. David, on the other hand, often appeared anything but regenerate. But the Lord declared that he was a man after his own heart. In Acts we are told that Simon, a sorcerer, believed and was admitted into the church through baptism (Acts 8:13). Later, Peter declared him apostate when he said, "You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God....For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin" (Act 8:21-23). Furthermore, the Lord

sought to encourage St. Paul in his labors at Corinth when he said, “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking [the gospel]...because I have many people in this city (emphasis mine)” (Acts 18:9-10). Who can forget the Lord’s chilling words in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven...Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matt. 7:21-23). Here are examples of people in the church who were not true believers, and people not in the church who were true believers.

A vital point of which verses like these remind us is that, at any given time, the visible church on earth is mixed. Sometimes it is more pure and sometimes it is less pure. Furthermore, any given congregation may have varying degrees of mixture. Jesus cautioned his people in the parables not to be overly zealous in seeking to discern what only God can discern. He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared” (Matt. 13:24-26). When the owner was asked if the weeds should be removed he responded, “No!” and then explained, “Because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest” (Matt. 13:29-30).

There may certainly be occasions, such as Peter’s pronouncement upon Simon, when the pulling up of weeds becomes necessary. These are matters addressed by elders in a process known as church discipline. What’s more, St. John said that unbelievers in time will often remove *themselves* from the church because their unregenerate hearts find no consonance with the gospel. He noted, “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 John 2:19).

What then is the basis of uniting in membership with Christ’s church? Are the doors wide open to anyone for any reason? Are we to be uncritical about what a person believes or how they live? Here the distinction between the visible and invisible church is helpful. The visible church is the church as *we* see it through our limited capacity and fallen nature. The invisible church is the church as *God* sees through his electing grace and sovereign decree. In the words of St. Paul, “God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’” (2 Tim. 2:19). As the Lord truly said to Samuel, we can only and ultimately judge by appearances (1 Sam. 16:7).

Most of what the Bible says about the church is with regard to the *visible* church. It is visible through its elders, its members, and its ministry—or as the *Westminster Confession* says, “Its ministry, oracles, and ordinances” (WCF XXV.3). We gather people to the visible church through the public preaching of the gospel. We unite professing believers and their children with the visible church through a visible baptism. We confirm believers in their faith through a visible table. When we receive members into our midst, we do so through appearances. However, these appearances must never be about a person’s wealth, popularity, or status (cf. Jer. 9:23-24). Rather, we must be concerned with matters of belief and conduct—one’s profession of faith in Christ and their walk with him. Paul said in Romans 10:9, “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” This is the key to admittance into the visible church. Can we get it wrong? Yes we can! But we prayerfully strive by God’s grace and his appointed means to gather the elect into the fold. In so doing we do not deal skeptically with each other, but rather rendering the judgment of charity. We regard each other as born again, brothers and sisters in Christ, and mutually heaven bound.

WHAT UNITES US?

On the shelf in my office is a book entitled, *Handbook of*

Denominations in the United States.⁵ It catalogues some 250 distinct churches and religious denominations which exist in our country today. To the average person the task of sorting through the variety of dissimilar doctrines and practices can be daunting and discouraging. Is it any wonder that the Christian witness is often viewed with cynicism?

In our Lord's high priestly prayer recorded for us in John 17, Jesus reveals his heart for the unity of his church: "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their [the apostle's] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you....May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have love me" (verses 20-23). The display of the church's unity is associated with the credibility of the church's witness. Yet, it would seem that Jesus' prayer remains unanswered.

However we should not arrive at that conclusion too quickly. Jesus also warned against false prophets within the church (Matt. 7:15) and noted that, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 7:21). To be sure, much disunity is nothing short of sin on the part of believers. The Apostle Paul points out that the Corinthian Church was fractured and fragmented because of its partisan spirit. He said, "I appeal to you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought....One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:10-13). The church at Corinth is not the picture we seek to emulate.

But, the problem runs more deeply. The fact is that there are, and always has been, wolves in sheep's clothing plaguing the church

⁵ Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, Rev. by Samuel S. Hill, 9th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

from without and within. Jesus' repetitious warning against false Christs and false prophets is a drum-beat with its crescendo claiming their purpose: "to deceive even the elect—if that were possible." He even adds, "See, I have told you ahead of time" (Matt. 24:4, 11, 23-25). Paul warned the church of Ephesus that, upon his departure, "savage wolves" would creep in behind him. He continued, "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). St. John's warning was blunt calling such false teachers, "the deceiver and the antichrist" (3 John 7). He even insisted that "if any one comes to you and does not bring this teaching [the true gospel], do not take him into your house or welcome him" (2 John 10). St. Paul insisted that the church's shepherds must be guardians of the gospel (1 Tim. 1:14; Titus 1:9), a function apparently lost in the modern church. This guardianship is in jeopardy because the church has lost its theological center.

The enduring question must be what is the basis of the church's unity? Here is where much confusion lies. With the rise of modernism infecting the 19th and early 20th century church, religious experience became the common ground for church unity. Theological "liberals," as they were once called,⁶ were unconcerned with how that experience was explained—only that it existed. Thus the experience of a Christian or a Hindu was regarded as not so different from each other, only *explained* differently. The explanation was not nearly as important as the experience itself. Evangelicalism was more cautious but tended to follow suit with its emphasis on religious experience. However, they insisted upon a stereotypical "born again" experience which could be orchestrated, dated, and recorded. Pentecostalism went even further. In highly charged meetings charismatic experiences evidenced by speaking in tongues were fostered and promoted as the ground of unity. What is common to all these movements is the elevating of experience and the

⁶ See J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1923).

diminishing or outright rejecting of the church's historic faith found in its creeds and confessions.⁷ As a result the church has groped in the dark for an answer to Jesus' prayer for unity. The Evangelical church, which routinely eschews its doctrine, has more recently, according to David Wells, co-opted a conservative political agenda as its common ground. I have found that agreement with such passing fancies, as "The Prayer of Jabez" or signing on to "The Purpose Driven Life" program, are viewed as the hope for harmony.

However, nothing unites like a common commitment to the true gospel. This has always been the basis of unity. Doctrine doesn't divide, as some would say. It unites! Error divides! St. Paul said that false teachers "distort the truth" thus breeding disunity (Acts 20:30). He appealed to the Corinthians to "agree" and be "united in mind and thought" (1 Cor. 1:10). He insisted that Timothy take what he had heard and "keep [it] as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus." Then Paul spoke pointedly: "Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you – guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (2 Tim 1:13-14). St. Jude called the church to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). This was the vision of the Reformation.

Something is wrong in the American Church. With our precious religious freedom has also come the freedom for wolves to multiply. With the ambiguity we feel toward creeds and confessions has come the loss of discernment and ability to call a false teacher "false." Our unity as Christians is not based on a common politic, a shivering experience, a certain feeling about things, or signing on to the hottest religious trend. Our unity is found in a common confession. That's what Jesus prayed for. We confess a Triune God who is both Creator and Redeemer. We

⁷ See David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993).

confess that the glory of God is seen in the face of Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son. We confess that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone, all because of Christ's atoning death and imputed righteousness alone. Paul said, "Men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ" (2 Cor. 9:13). We confess that the Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of life. We confess that "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called." We confess, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Peter confessed to the Lord, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living." Jesus responded, "On this rock [this confession] I will build my church" (Matt. 16:16-18). We confess that our forefathers of the Reformation got it right in recovering apostolic Christianity as taught by the Apostles, the early church, and articulated in the historic Protestant confessions and catechism. We confess! We confess! We confess!—because it unites us, honors Christ, promotes evangelism, and makes us strong. We recognize that maintaining and striving for the church's unity is a worthy pursuit. We agree with Paul when he said, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace: (Eph. 4:3). When we say together, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord ..." we stand united. When we sing, "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord," we also acknowledge the realities of a sinful world, "by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." But with the final verse we by faith stand with the certainty of our Lord's high priestly prayer:

Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One, and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won: O happy ones and holy! Lord, give us grace that we, like them, the meek and lowly, on high may dwell with thee.⁸

⁸ Samuel J. Stone, "The Church's One Foundation" in *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990).

HOLY TO THE LORD

Shortly before my mother died she had been making a chess set for me. She had worked with slip casting for some years, but her real talent was in painting her figures, particularly faces. However, she never finished the set, for in the middle of the project she succumbed to ill health and the Lord took her home.

The figures I have are incomplete and therefore useless as a game set. They have no worth to anyone other than me. Perhaps they even appear to others a little tacky. But, they are precious to me, as they bear the imprint of my mother's affection.

When I look at those figures on my office shelf, I think of how the Lord regards his church. Despite the fact we don't function well and the world regards us as useless, we are nevertheless precious to the Lord. He chose us, loved us, and called us his own (Deut. 7:7-8). He sets us apart from the world and bestows undeserved blessings upon us.

There is a word in the Bible that describes this special status to which the church is appointed. It is the word *holy*. To be holy is to be set apart to a sacred task and regarded as uncommon. It is the opposite of *profane*. The church's holiness embraces a number of related ideas. The Lord said of his people, Israel, "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deut. 7:6; cf. Deut. 14:2; cf. Ex.19:5; Psa. 135:4). At Sinai they were called "a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6) and in the wilderness they were regarded as "the apple of his eye" (Deut. 32:10; cf. Psa. 17:8). The priest bore on his garments a gold plate which read, "HOLY TO THE LORD" (Ex. 28:36). Jeremiah said, "Israel was holy to the LORD, the first fruits of his harvest" (Jer. 2:3). In St. Peter's statement about the church he said, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5). He continued, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pet. 2:9). Such Old Testament laws

as diet, feasts, Sabbaths, and so forth, served, among other things, to distinguish God's people as holy from the surrounding nations.

The primary meaning of the church's holiness pertains to its standing before a holy God. We are set apart, distinguished, and regarded as God's treasured possession. Thus the church *is* holy.

Yet holiness concerns not only what we are, but what we are becoming. St. Paul says of the church as it embraces the gospel promises, "Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Cor. 7:1). The author of Hebrews admonishes us to, "Make every effort to...be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). Thus the church is also *becoming* holy.

The true church is not only objectively holy; it is pursuing holiness in its corporate life, and fostering holiness among its individual members. In our justification, God regards us as holy by imputing Christ's righteousness to us through the gospel. In our sanctification, the Lord enables us to grow in holiness and righteousness through his word and Spirit. St. Paul said, "For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thess. 4:7; cf. vv. 3-6). Elsewhere he notes the Lord's desire that we "be made new" and calls us "to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24). Jesus prayed in his high priestly prayer, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). As his garments set the Old Covenant priest apart, distinguished his office from the profane, and dedicated him to a sacred task—they sanctified him—so the word of God adorns believers and sanctifies them from the world. Yet this same word of God is that which is necessary for our sanctification—our growth in holiness and Christ-likeness.

One of the grand pictures of the church in the Bible is that of the bride of Christ. In the book of Ephesians husbands are admonished, "Love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to

himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25-27). Here is what is fundamentally meant when we confess, "I believe in the *holy catholic church*." When the church stands before the living God, she is regarded as holy. This holiness is not due to any inherent goodness or redeeming quality in her; it is due solely to Jesus' sin bearing death and imputed righteousness. These things can only be received by faith in the crucified One. "Christ loved her and gave himself up for her to make her holy." However, as the church is graciously regarded as holy, it must also fulfill its identity by seeking to be holy in its life and conduct. Christ is "cleansing her...with water through the word" so she might appear "radiant,...holy and blameless."

Brides come in many shapes and sizes. Not all are equally as beautiful, reckoned by human standards. But in the end her beauty is not in the accoutrements of the wedding ceremony or her palatial adornment, but in the eye of her beholder—her bridegroom. That's all that counts. What counts for us is that our bridegroom sees in us the beauty of holiness. Like those chess pieces on my shelf—those special tokens of my mother's affection—the church is regarded by God as a treasured possession, set apart, and holy. It matters little how the world regards the church so long as we are holy to the Lord.

ARE PROTESTANTS CATHOLIC?

Military life for a young man can be lonely and detached. During my years of service I had received a temporary duty assignment in New Haven, Connecticut. I had enjoyed a weekend on leave at home with family and friends when I arrived at the Midtown Motor Inn in downtown New Haven where I would be staying for several weeks. I felt isolated, unfamiliar, and cut off from fellowship. I was depressed. Having registered, I was in the process of transporting my bags to my room fully expecting to spend an unbearable evening alone. However, when I disembarked the elevator on the third floor I was stopped in my tracks by the sound of music filling the hallway. An organ was

playing familiar hymns. In a vacant room I found a small group of believers gathering for worship and they invited me to join them. Soon my mental cloud lifted and in the fellowship of God's people found the truth of what St. Paul said, "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). I recall thinking of the Lord's goodness in providing for what a young man needed at just the right moment. But I also learned a lesson about the church—it is catholic.

I grew up in a church that used a version of the Apostles' Creed that had changed the word "catholic" to "Christian" so we confessed these words: "I believe in the holy *Christian church*." This was mistaken. By removing the word "catholic" from the creed we removed a major and important category of thought upon which our hearts and minds should dwell. Many Protestants, particularly Evangelicals, have a problem with the word "catholic" because they think it sounds too much like *Roman Catholic* and everyone knows, so the reasoning goes, that Protestants aren't Catholic. This too is mistaken. Although Protestants are not *Roman Catholic*—and that for good reason—that does not mean that we are not catholic in the biblical sense of things.

Around 110 AD Ignatius of Antioch claimed, "Even as where Jesus may be, there is the universal [or catholic] church" (Ignatius, Letter to the Smyrneans: 8). Eventually the term catholic came to be used to distinguish the true church from heretical sects and movements. Thus to be catholic was to be in the true church. During the Reformation, Rome insisted that they alone were catholic because they alone enjoyed worldwide expanse. It was pointed out that Protestants were mostly confined to Europe in the 16th century. But was Rome the true church? The Reformers did not believe so. Even though Rome might have been able to boast of universal breadth throughout the world, her gospel had become corrupted as to be no gospel at all. The Reformers, on the other hand, believed themselves catholic, not because their scope was worldwide, but their doctrine was that universally embraced by the true church through time.

The word “catholic” is not found in the Bible, but its idea is. When we confess, “the holy *catholic* church” we certainly acknowledge the universal scope of the church. By this we mean that the church isn’t just in our town and only among people just like us. God’s people are everywhere. They are not confined to a particular country, race, ethnicity, or even denominational affiliation. We acknowledge that this was always God’s intent for his church (Cf. Gen. 12:3; Isa. 49:6; Jonah 1:2). The Lord said through the prophet Malachi, “My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations” (Mal. 1:11). Here in terms of the Old Covenant, true worship is viewed as making its way throughout the whole world. When we embrace this attribute of the church we resist provincialism—believing ourselves to be the only true Christians. We deny sectarianism—the attitude that only those with our label are in the fold. We reject isolationism—withdrawing from any association from the larger church. We repudiate racism—the belief that God is a respecter of persons. We affirm that the church is made up of those who profess faith in Christ “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev. 7:9). The church is therefore multicultural, multi-racial, multi-generational, and multi-ethnic. It is catholic.

When we confess, “the holy *catholic* church” we also embrace a worldwide vision for the church. Thus when we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying for the catholicity of the church. We affirm the missionary mandate that we are called to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). We send missionaries through the world confident in Jesus’ promise, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). We insist that there is one gospel for all peoples. We are catholic.

The church has not always been generally spread throughout the world, but it has always been catholic. Old Covenant saints were largely confined to a nation, but they were nevertheless catholic.

The Apostolic Church was at first only in Jerusalem, but it was catholic. Later it spread to the boundaries of Judea and Samaria, but it was still catholic. When it spread to the ends of the earth it was not any more catholic than before. Today, though the church is found in virtually every corner of the globe, it barely exists if at all in many Islamic countries. In other places the church is so far a field from the historic faith as to constitute no church at all. Yet we still rightly confess belief “in the holy *catholic* church.” We do so because the church is universal in its embrace and universal in its vision. It always was and always will be. Edmund P. Clowney has said, “Catholicity is not a wide gate opening to a broad road, but that narrow gate to which the Lord of the church calls us. Catholicity means that the church is Christ’s. We cannot exclude those whom he welcomes, or welcome those whom he excludes.”⁹

A CHURCH THAT IS APOSTOLIC

We face a profoundly different world today than we did thirty years ago. Cherished beliefs and traditions that used to unite us as Americans have given way to unprecedented social fragmentation and competitive voices. There is no longer a universally held story in which we all share. The modern religious climate is pluralistic in the extreme.

This has affected the church. Many, from within, are insisting that we must reinvent ourselves. This new reality, we are told, calls for discarding the old and embracing the new—that is, new ways of thinking about God, humanity, hope, and ethics, and new ways of doing church, worship, mission, and ministry. The church of the future, we are told, cannot—indeed must not—look like the church of the past. One book I recently read on the 21st century church introduced its contents with this sentence, “Expect to encounter revolutionary ideas that will sometimes unnerve you.”¹⁰ But is the need for change that urgent? Is the church of the

⁹ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 97.

¹⁰ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shape of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), ix.

past really obsolete? I have heard alarmists before and find they often have an untoward but hidden agenda. We freely admit that the world has changed and the church of the future must take these changes into account. However, we also recognize the danger of cutting ourselves off from our past. Before moving forward, we must appreciate where we have been. Not all the church's wheels are out of round and in need of being reinvented. There is a base line to which we must return when facing changing times and an uncertain future. This is bound up in the fact that church is *apostolic*.

When the church in Acts gathered, they too faced seismic changes in their world. Yet before they looked forward, they looked back. We read, "They devoted themselves to the *apostles' teaching (emphasis mine)* and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). They followed a pattern established by the apostles and committed themselves to a timeless body of truth taught by the apostles. Jude calls it, "The faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). St. Paul told his young understudy, Timothy, "What you have heard from me, keep as a pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit" (2 Tim. 1:13-14). Paul then said, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2). This is what we mean when we say that the church is apostolic. We are not referring to an ancient office being conferred over generations. We are not talking about the authority of the church being bound up with one individual. Rather, the church is apostolic because it embraces the apostles' doctrine.

By any standard, the apostles bore special status in the early church. They were specifically chosen by Christ to be apostles—sent ones—to witness his miracles, observe his ministry, and bear his message. In short, they were called simply to be "with him" (Mark 3:14). They were granted inspirational gifts by the Holy Spirit who led them to all truth (John 14:26; 16:12-14). Their

writings bore the same weight as those of the Old Testament Prophets and together formed the very foundation upon which the church was built, with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). Their letters and writings were circulated and read authoritatively alongside those of the Prophets in sacred assemblies (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; Rev. 1:3). The apostles possessed certain authenticating marks in the form of signs and wonders. These set their office apart from the more ordinary and perpetual offices of the church, and established their message as from God (2 Cor. 12:12). The gospel message they taught and proclaimed was not to be tampered with or changed by addition or deletion (Gal. 1:6-9; Rev. 22:18-19). St. Paul noted that the "mystery of Christ...has now been revealed by the Spirit of God's holy apostles and prophets" (Eph. 3:5). Jesus told the twelve, "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me" (Matt. 10:40).

The church is apostolic because we proclaim Christ first and foremost. St. Paul said, "Brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand....For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:1-4). The sum and substance of the apostles' preaching was the person and work of Christ (Acts 2:22-28; 3:12-16; 4:8-12; 17:30-31).

The church is apostolic because we teach the *meaning* of Christ's death and resurrection. Like the apostles we are concerned not only *that* Jesus died, but *why* he died. St. Peter claims, "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). St. John says, "This is love [that God] sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). St. Paul insists, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification" (Rom. 4:25).

The church is apostolic because we have a passion to proclaim Christ to the nations. Thus every Christian is an ambassador

representing Christ before the world (2 Cor. 5:20). This ambassadorial and apostolic message is not ours to alter or adjust to our liking. We are to deliver it in tact as our Lord gave it to his apostles. What's more, the church is under no illusion that all will be equally delighted to hear because, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). Furthermore, those who preach Christ are "the aroma of Christ." But, to unbelievers that aroma is "the smell of death"; to God's elect "the fragrance of life" (2 Cor. 2:15-16). Jesus, speaking to his detractors, reveals why this is so: "You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice" (John 10:26-27).

Thus, the *primary* concern of a church that is apostolic is not to read the culture, but to read the Bible. This is what the apostles taught us to do. Churches of the Reformation heritage are regarded as "Reformed and always reforming." However, this process of "always reforming" is not "according to the culture," but "according to the Scriptures." We would be foolish to think otherwise. The pathway forward in this ever changing world is to secure our apostolic past and to delight in the heritage that has helped preserved it.

THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

The letters to the seven churches in *Revelation* are classic rebukes to churches on the verge of losing their gospel light (2:5). Six of them receive some measure of praise. Yet, five of them also receive strong rebuke and warning. Some are teetering on the edge of extinction, dangerously entertaining such false doctrines as those of Balaam (2:12) and the Nicolaitans (2:15; cf. 2:6), or the practices of the prophetess Jezebel (2:20). Others are loveless (2:4), lifeless (3:1), or lukewarm (3:15-16). Surprisingly all of them for the present are regarded as true churches to one degree or another—thus our Lord's interest in them. However, they all risk ceasing to be true churches, becoming instead "synagogues of Satan" (2:9, 3:9).

This raises an important and persistent issue. How can we discern between a true church and a synagogue of Satan? It is not always as obvious as our Lord made it in the *Book of Revelation*. This is an ever present problem, and perhaps even more pressing today with the proliferation of religious organizations, sects, and denominations that are spun into existence under the banner of religious liberty. Our first amendment grants the right for religious freedom, but doesn't guarantee that what emerges is a true church of Christ. What then are those distinguishing marks which separate a true from a false church?

This question became very important during the Protestant Reformation because believers were faced with separating from the corrupt church of their day. Our Reformed heritage responded by setting forth *the marks of the church*. Over and against the Roman church, which insisted on allegiance to papal authority as the mark of the true church, the Reformers insisted on three spiritual indicators: the faithful preaching of the Word, the faithful administration of the sacraments, and the presence and exercise of discipline (see the *Belgic Confession* Article 29; *Second Helvetic Confession*, XVII, 9-12). The reformer John Calvin insisted regarding the true church, "If it has the ministry of the Word and honors it, if it has the administration of the sacraments, it deserves without doubt to be held and considered a church."¹¹ We mean by the ministry of the Word not merely that the Bible is represented some how, but that it is preached in such a manner as to exalt Christ as the only ground of our eternal hope. The sacraments then enact visibly what the word proclaims audibly. In other words, if the *true gospel* of Christ is not faithfully proclaimed in word and sacrament, and the church's governmental oversight does not keep this gospel front and center, no ecclesiastical organization, no matter how ancient, impressive, powerful, or successful, could be regarded as a true church. This is the Reformation's legacy. When Christ is exalted both audibly and visually through God's appointed means, and a

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.1.9.

body of overseers acts as guardians of the gates and shepherds of the flock to maintain the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace, *this* is a church of Christ. Without these marks, there is no church. We may be dealing with a sect, a cult, or a false religion of some kind, but not a true church of Christ.

It is not always easy to discern between a true church and a synagogue of Satan since no church is perfect. All churches are encumbered with a mixture of truth and error to one degree or another because Christ has placed his church in the hands of sinful human beings. It would therefore be unwise for any branch of the church to claim to be the “only true church.” Yet these marks do provide ground for discernment. Take the following as an example. In a particular congregation, the gospel may be preached poorly but it exists in its fundamental integrity. The sacraments may be practiced imperfectly, yet Christ is exalted and offered as the foundation of our hope. Its elders may not be particularly learned, skilled, or competent, yet they prayerfully strive to provide some measure of government and order for God’s people. Here we may not have a *perfect* church, but we do have a *true* church. However, when the gospel is ignored, distorted, or denied from the pulpit (cf. Gal. 1:6-9), the sacraments are maligned through neglect or mockery, or discipline is simply ignored or nonexistent, this is a synagogue of Satan.

True churches vary in size and ethnicity. They may be found in any number of different denominations such as Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, or independent. Yet sadly, many under such labels no longer proclaim the true gospel. In some churches Jesus, though regarded as a moral example to emulate, is not a sinless Savior in whom to trust for salvation. His death may be the highest act of love, but not a sacrifice for sin to satisfy divine justice. In some cases Biblical ethics has been turned on its head with the promotion and endorsement of unnatural affections among ministers and laity. Recently, in one congregation the minister dressed up as a clown to celebrate communion. Another minister entered his sanctuary on the back of an elephant. This silliness is nothing short of compromise

where the gospel has been rejected and replaced with the modern equivalents of the teachings of Balaam and the practices of Jezebel.

True churches are not judged on the basis of their growth, program, music, entertainment value, facilities, financial resources, or theological novelty. A true church is discovered by its faithfulness to the gospel. Jesus is proclaimed as the divine Son of God, second person of the Trinity, Savior of sinners offering *his* righteousness as the ground of salvation. For Martin Luther this was the article upon which the church would stand or fall. A true church displays these truths in the regular and respectful celebration of the sacraments. A true church possesses leaders with courage—willing to pay the price and stand firm in a world pressuring them to conform and compromise at every turn. In short, a true church faithfully preaches the word, observes the sacraments, and exercises discipline. This is the kind of church we should seek out, unite with, and faithfully support.

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

My first real job as a high school student was a stock boy at a supermarket. We always knew when the night manager was coming because we could hear the keys which hung from his belt jingling as he walked. I was impressed with those keys. They opened and closed doors; they allowed people entrance and kept them out. He couldn’t use them any way he wanted—for instance, he couldn’t lock the doors before closing hours or leave the cash box standing open. But they gave him the right to act as a supervisor. They were the symbol of his authority delegated to him by the owners.

When Jesus received Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi, he affirmed it as the ground—the rock—upon which the church would be built (Matt. 16:15-18). He then granted authority to the church with these words: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:19; cf. 18:18; John 20:23). As in any institution, keys are given

by “the powers that be” to those delegated to exercise authority. When they move on, the keys are turned in and given to others. Here Christ gave the keys of the kingdom to the temporary apostolic office. But before they died, they passed them on to the perpetual office of elder. Thus the authority of Christ continues in that office to this day. As an elder dies, he turns in his keys. As another is ordained they are passed on.

Many people in the modern world are suspicious of authority. They are like the subjects in the parable who said, “We do not want this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14, ESV). Some of that suspicion is understandable. There are all too many tragic examples throughout history of abuses of power—in the church as well as the state. Yet some of that suspicion is born out of our culture of individualism and the “Jesus and me is all I need” religion. Though one may have no choice but to endure civil authorities, it is reasoned, why would anyone submit voluntarily to the authority of the church, which is regarded as optional? Can we not come and go as we please? For the Bible believing Christian the answer is simple. We don’t believe that the church or its authority in our lives is optional. The Lord expects that those who profess faith in Christ will unite in fellowship with his church and enjoy the oversight of those appointed as under-shepherds of the Great Shepherd of the Sheep (Heb. 13:20). The author of Hebrews admonished believers, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:17).

Furthermore, those who are granted this authority by their ordination are bound to a particular *kind* of leadership. Jesus told his apostles, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a

ransom for many” (Mk 10:42-45). St. Paul informed the Corinthians that “the authority the Lord gave us [is] for building you up rather than pulling you down” (2 Cor. 10:8). St. Peter told elders to serve as overseers, “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). Our Lord’s brother, James, issued this warning, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers...because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1).

Those who are entrusted with the keys of the kingdom are responsible first and foremost to the Lord who gave them. Therefore they must take care for the manner in which they are used. If you do not obey civil law, the local sheriff may appear at your door and force you to comply. Its authority is *coercive*. But the church’s authority is ministerial and declarative. It is *persuasive*. These keys are its right to proclaim the gospel, receive and dismiss members—that is, bind and loose—and to hold God’s people accountable by appealing to the conscience. Those who possess the keys are the gatekeepers, responsible to open the door of the visible church to those who profess faith in Christ in truth and with sincerity. But they must also shut the door of the visible church to the profane, the mockers, and the unbelievers. The keys of the kingdom granted to the church are the symbols of authority granted by Christ to act in his behalf. And though the keys of the kingdom do not—indeed must not—come with the powers of civil government to force compliance, we must not undervalue the superior authority of the King of kings who, through his word and Spirit, subdues whomever he wills. After all did not St. Paul remind us that, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4). Furthermore, the Word of God in the hands of a faithful minister “is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and the attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

We are shaped by the kind of authority under which we live. When that authority is oppressive, overbearing, and controlling,

we are injured and diminished. On the other hand, if that authority serves with humility, ministers the grace of the gospel, and sets forth the Savior's example, we are enveloped in Christ's love, enlarged, and released. We need the authority of the church of Christ in our lives. We need the ministry of the Word and the oversight of elders who care. We need to renew our respect for the power and place of the keys of the kingdom. Christ gave them to his church for his glory and our good.

HOW IS THE CHURCH GOVERNED?

When people gather for a common cause some form of government is necessary. This is just as true of the church as it is of any other society. Despite the fact that cynicism exists toward governments, authority structures, and institutions in the U. S., Christians must resist this worldly attitude when it comes to the church of Christ. We recognize that the Bible has much to say about church government, to which we must pay attention. In fact our name speaks to our form of government—*Presbyterian* means government by elders. We do not insist that a true church must have the most Biblical form of government. But we do maintain that it is to the church's advantage to be governed according to those principles set forth in the Word of God.

The most basic notion of Biblical government for the church is the rule of elders (Ex. 18:21-22). Some believe that the twelve apostles were the established model and thus try to perpetuate that office today. But the apostolic office was temporary. An apostle had to have seen the risen Lord (1 Cor. 9:1) and possess powers of performing miraculous signs (2 Cor. 12:12)—neither of which existed beyond the first century. Their function, among other things, was to establish churches and appoint *presbyters*—Greek for elders—as overseers of those churches. When the last apostle died, however, the office died with him and the perpetual office of elder remained to carry on.

The New Testament is clear that each church possessed a plurality of elders and that each elder bore parity or equality with the rest.

On their first missionary journey we are told that Paul and Barnabas organized churches and “appointed elders for them in each church” (Acts 14:23). Later Paul would tell Titus, “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). Stopping in Miletus upon his return to Jerusalem Paul “sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church” to bid them farewell (Acts 2:17). Furthermore, Peter, who was also an apostle, admonished elders as a “fellow elder” indicating the parity others enjoyed with him in the ministry (1 Peter 5:1). Parity and plurality of elders in local congregations is fundamental to Biblical government.

There are, however, two additional principles that must also be preserved and maintained. First, individual congregations have the right to choose their own elders. Second, prospective elders are to be approved and set apart by those currently in leadership by the laying on of hands and prayer. These principles are found in Acts 6 which is usually regarded as the origin of the diaconate—the benevolence and mercy ministry within the church. But *how* these first “deacons” were appointed is typical of how elders are likewise appointed. When need arose in the Jerusalem Church the apostles instructed its members in this procedure: “Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). After this was accomplished we are told, “They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:6). In other words congregations are to elect their own leaders to serve and represent them, giving special attention to their spiritual qualifications (Acts 6:3, 1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-9). The current eldership is charged with determining their suitability for the task by examining them in the areas of doctrine and life (1 Tim. 4:15-16). If satisfied, they may proceed to ordination. If not they may recommend further preparation or disqualify them altogether. The process provides safeguards within the parameters of human wisdom and ability. No leader is to be imposed upon a congregation from the top down. Yet, each leader receives the necessary scrutiny from those who have the maturity, wisdom, and discernment to pass judgment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ORDINATION

One additional component of Biblical church government is its connectionalism. In other words, New Testament churches were *not* independent of one another. This penchant toward independency is a problem in the American church. Some insist on standing alone because whole denominations have fallen into apostasy. Why should the problems of one church be the concern of another? Furthermore, we must admit that when churches lose their doctrinal center and opt for experientialism there is nothing substantial to bind them together. But the churches in the New Testament *were* bound together. Paul wrote letters to one church fully expecting that they be passed on and read in others (Col. 4:16). When they faced problems they did so together. Paul sought repeatedly to bind the Jewish branch and the Gentile branch of the church together by collecting financial resources from the affluent Gentiles to give to the poor in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17; 1 Cor. 16:2-3; 2 Cor. 8-9). They also debated and made decisions together. When the gospel was in jeopardy from a growing legalism, a general council was called where elders from many churches gathered in Jerusalem to debate the issue in an orderly manner. The decisions that were made at that general assembly—the so-called Jerusalem Council—were reported through letter and delegate as normative for all the churches (Acts 15:30-31). Thus elders are concerned not only with their own church, but the church at large.

When an elder is ordained in our church we who currently bear the office extend to him the right hand of fellowship, welcoming him “to take part in this ministry with us.” The elders of a church are a team of ministering servants responsible for the peace, purity, unity, and edification of God’s people. Men who aspire to this office must possess a sense of call that God is leading them to minister in this capacity (1 Tim. 3:1). They must be churchmen whose interests concern both the health and well being of the local church, as well as the work of the broader Kingdom. At the end of the day a church will only be as strong as its body of elders who serve it.

“What the church needs today are modern leaders! We need men who cast vision, organize, inspire, motivate, solve problems, propose solutions, and administrate programs. We need men with personality, to whom people are attracted. We need talented men who can build great churches.” At least, this is what we are told. The problem with this is that it describes a CEO, not a shepherd. It is my contention—indeed conviction—that it is wrong headed and weakening the modern church.

While recognizing the value of such qualities, none of them comprise the essence of a ministerial call. We do not ordain CEO’s to manage companies, engineers to design products, or actors to entertain audiences. Why? Because their talents and training are natural, and their function is secular. But we *do* ordain ministers of the gospel, because they bear a heavenly function in the life of the church. It is because of the biblical doctrine of ordination that the function of church cannot be replicated by worldly or secular institutions. Ministers are not ordained as church managers, but as ministers of the gospel. In their ordination ministers are granted authority to exercise the keys of the kingdom and appointed to speak to God’s people in behalf of Christ who is head of the church.

There is no more fundamental notion in Protestant ecclesiology than the conviction that Christ alone is King and head of his church. He rules it by his word and his Spirit. But how does this work itself out practically in the visible church? In a minister’s ordination a man of God is set apart to act in behalf of Christ in the midst of God’s people. He is to administer the appointed means of grace to build up the body of Christ.

When Christ ascended into heaven, his visible presence was removed from the church. He left the authority of oversight in the hands of men appointed to serve in his absence. These office bearers are Christ’s gifts to his church. St. Paul recognized this when he said that, “It was [the Lord] who gave some to be

apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:11-12). Jesus initially called the apostles to fill the foundational office of the church. Mark records that, "Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach" (Mk. 3:13-4).

Later, as churches were established, ministers were appointed through the act of ordination. This ceremony was accomplished as the current leadership—that is, the body of elders or presbytery—set a man apart with the laying on of hands and prayer (Cf. Acts 6:6). The Scriptures attach deep significance to this occasion. Thus we must not regard it as some quaint or antiquated ceremony which is emotionally stirring but nothing more.

On two occasions St. Paul reminded Timothy of his day of ordination. He said, "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Tim. 4:14). Later he told Timothy, "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:6-7). Timothy was to find courage and conviction for the work at hand by recalling the significance of his ordination. Note that Timothy was not self appointed. He was ordained by a "body of elders"—literally a presbytery of ministerial peers. Ordination is the end of a process of testing and examination. A man is ordained to the ministry only when those currently in office believe that he possesses all that is necessary to be a minister of the gospel.

Most significantly, however, is the fact that there is indeed something of a mysterious and supernatural quality imparted by the event of ordination. Unlike Roman Catholics, Protestants do not believe that ordination is a sacrament. Yet there is something

sacramental about it in that it serves as an outward sign of an inward grace. On both occasions Paul mentions a "gift of God" in some way imparted by the laying on of hands. What is this gift? It is unlikely that it refers to ministerial gifts. Rather, a special endowment of the Holy Spirit is in view. Through it Timothy was granted "a spirit [that is the Holy Spirit] of power, of love and of self-discipline." In the same way that anointing pictured the descent of the Spirit of God equipping a man for his office (Psalm 133), so ordination portrays and effects the Spirit's outpouring in some capacity. It is like the passing of the mantle from Elijah to Elisha (2 Kings 2:9-14). Recall how the transference of sin was effected when the High Priest laid his hands on the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:21). In like manner the laying on of hands in ordination imparts to a minister a spiritual anointing, qualifying him to serve in Christ's stead.

Although a man of God is greatly blessed by his ordination, the benefits to the church of God are greater still. Ordination sets ministers apart as Ambassadors of Christ. As such they are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1-KJV). In our Lord's visible absence his voice is yet heard and his promises displayed through the tasks to which ministers are called. For this reason ordination also sets the church apart from the world as well. Ministers are not ordained and endowed to function as CEO's of a religious organization, nor to entertain an audience week after week. They are prepared, equipped, called, and ordained to preach the word. "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say in Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Isa. 52:7). This is how Christ intended his church to grow. Ministers must be afforded freedom to perform and perfect the tasks to which they are called.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the hero Odysseus sailed to the end of the world in search of adventure. On his journey he encountered the sirens, mythic beings whose blissful songs allure sailors to

destruction. Their soothing sounds were not what they seemed for they led to certain death as their ships were dashed upon hidden reefs.

The elders of the church are faced with the reality of ministering in a sinful world. They must recognize the subtlety and attraction of lies and deception—the ever present siren songs. The Bible says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end it leads to is death” (Pro 14:12). St. Paul warns of those who have rejected the truth of God’s word and “so have shipwrecked their faith” (1 Tim. 1:19). The Greeks embodied this notion of those who deceive in the sirens. The Bible calls them wolves. Jesus told his disciples, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matt. 7:15). St. Paul warned the elders of Ephesus that, “After I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock” (Acts 20:29). Thus, they were given this charge: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28).

Although elders are concerned with the spiritual health of individual members they must also be interested in the health of the church at large. The church is fragile. Sadly her members sometimes succumb to the world’s siren songs. They listen to other voices (1 Tim. 1:20). They fall into worldly lifestyles (1 Cor. 5:1). Pride prevails (3 John 9-10). Love for Jesus is displaced with personal agendas. These things detract from God’s glory, disrupt the church’s peace, and cannot be ignored. Our Lord understands this propensity and has thus commissioned his under shepherds to a nurturing and correcting oversight of his church. We call this function *church discipline*.

The gospels use the word “church” only two times. After Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi Jesus promised, “On this rock I will build my church (Matt. 16:18). Later, Jesus established an orderly procedure to address the inevitable problems which arise among its members as a result of sin (Matt. 18:15-17). Jesus said, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just

between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt. 18:15-17). Reformed Christians see in these two references the rudiments of church order. First, the Lord grounds church membership in our confession of faith in Christ. Second, he offers a three step approach to address issues of sin and conflict in the church. He furthermore places the authority to maintain its peace, purity, and unity to the glory of God squarely with the elders’ disciplinary function.

On one level discipline is the province of all Christians (Gal. 6:1). For instance, when St. Paul said, “Love keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:5), he reminded us that we must not hold on to offences as the world does. Thus it is incumbent upon all of us to seek reconciliation with one another on a personal level when we offend or are offended (Matt. 5:23-25). Furthermore, we are responsible to help restore brothers and sisters who err by following the steps of Matthew 18. But when Jesus said, “tell it to the church” he meant “tell it to the elders”—as the official government of the church. If disruptive issues of sin remain unresolved the elders have authority from Christ to intervene for the glory of God and the sake of his church.

Yet, the idea of *church discipline* is largely ignored today. Since the church in America is generally regarded as having no official authority in our lives, the subject is usually relegated to the church’s history of oppression. It is seen as impractical since Americans are thought to be “church shoppers” at heart, and pretty much come and go as they please. Besides, if we are not satisfied in one church, we can go to the church across town. Furthermore, it is regarded as an impediment to evangelism since it implies that something may be expected of us by way of belief or conduct. Thus church discipline is a tough sell in the modern church.

However, the idea of discipline is an important Biblical concept and a significant component in our Presbyterian government. Generally speaking church discipline concerns all those *pastoral* and *judicial* actions that elders take on behalf of the members of the visible and local church. Pastoral actions are *informal*. They involve such things as pastoral oversight, instruction in the Word, biblical counsel, spiritual conversation, visitation, encouragement, correction, and so forth. Judicial functions concern the *formal* actions of the Session. They include interviewing prospective members, receiving and dismissing members, public ministry of the word and Sacraments, examining and ordaining elders, and certain official corrective measures intended to lead erring members to repentance and reconciliation. Such measures in order of severity may include formal rebuke, suspension from the Lord's Table, or, as a last resort, excommunication. Church discipline will always be necessary as long as sirens sing and wolves howl.

Elders are called as guardians of the gate and keepers of the flock. They are appointed to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). St. Paul told Titus, "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, having nothing to do with him" (Titus 3:10f). They are also concerned with the purity of the church. The Corinthians endured a man living in open incest. Paul inquired, "Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?" (1 Cor. 5:2). Finally elders are concerned with the doctrine of the church. They must "guard good the deposit...with the help of the Holy Spirit" (2 Tim. 1:14). Paul insists, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9).

Church discipline must never be harsh or vindictive, nor an excuse for control or manipulation (1 Pet. 5:3). It is a tool in the elder's tool box of ministry to enable him to better serve Christ, build up his body, advance his kingdom, and glorify God. When

sirens sing and saints succumb discipline is in order.

THE COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS

There is a tendency today among professing Christians to minimize the value and place of the church in their lives. Perhaps this is a by-product of our broader cultural distrust for "organized religion" in general. Nevertheless, the sentiment either implied or expressed in these terms, "Jesus, Yes! The Church, No!" is disappointingly all too common.

Yet, from the beginning Christians have always gathered in identifiable communities. Among our creed's affirmations is this: "I believe in the communion of the saints." This rich idea has not always been rightly understood. The Roman Church, for instance, has insisted that this refers, in part, to a communing reality between the church on earth and the church in heaven. Thus, they offer prayers for the dead, and expect dead "saints" to aid the living in their troubles. Protestants have rejected this notion for want of Biblical support.

The communion of the saints has also been wrongly used to justify communalism—the fostering of religious communities based on the common ownership of property and possession, and a radical separation from the world. Communal experiments are scatter throughout history and generally end in embarrassment and failure. They are certainly not the Biblical ideal for the church.

When we confess belief in the communion of the saints, we stand on the ground of two biblical truths. First, all who profess Christ and experience the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit are united to Christ as a branch to its vine (John 15:4-5). Thus true believers enjoy intimate communion with their Savior. Second, all true believers are united to each other as well through the blood bond of Christ's mediation. As the same Holy Spirit indwells all genuine believers, we are drawn to each other in a common life—that is, we experience the communion of saints (Eph. 4:4-6). St.

John's first epistle explores this fellowship in the family of God. He says, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). The Greek word for "fellowship" is *koinonia* and may also be translated "communion." Simply put, John insists that he preaches the gospel so that people may enjoy the communion of the saints—a communion based upon communion with the Father and Son. Several verses later he says, "If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship [communion] with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Again, here is a communion grounded in a common commitment to the work of Christ.

The communion of the saints is a significant doctrine because it brings into focus an important evidence of saving grace. If we love Jesus, we *will* love his church. If we are not attracted to the church, it's because we are not attracted to the same Jesus who bled and died for it. We can not love Jesus who is the head, and yet hate his body, the church. St. John is clear, "We know that we have passed from death to life [that is, been born again], because we love our brothers [the church]. Anyone who does not love remains in death [is unsaved]" (1 John 3:14). He also drew attention to certain individuals who left the communion of believers thus revealing they never enjoyed communion with Christ in the first place. He says of them, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19).

The communion of the saints also teaches us that we are vitally linked to the church of the past. In other words, we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before. Consequently, we must have a healthy respect for the accomplishments of God's people in previous ages. The author of Hebrews had this in mind when he said, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race

marked out for us" (Heb. 12:1). The picture drawn here is that of an arena. The church today is engaged in the race while the church triumphant—that is, the church in heaven—cheers it on. Jesus prayed for the church of the future when he said, "I pray also for those who will believe through their [the apostles'] message" (John 17:20). St. Paul gave this charge to Timothy: "What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (2 Tim. 1:13-14).

The apostles intended that the truth of God's word be taught, defended, and passed on from generation to generation in tact. Someone has said that, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." If this is true then we have reason to respect our heritage—our tradition. Reformed Christians believe that its tradition is strong and speaks powerfully the world of today. Our creeds, confessions, and catechisms have been born out of prayer and sealed in blood. They are scripturally rooted and time-tested, and thus must not be quickly discarded in favor of some new novelty. Paul has said, "Test everything. Hold on to the good" (1 Thess. 5:21). But we need not reinvent the church every generation. The church of yesterday has earned the right to teach the church of today. The communion of the saints challenges a world that values impermanence and holds the church to its better days of the past.

However, we acknowledge there are times when the church has become a disappointment. We live in a fallen world and sin continues to plague us all. Some people have left the church because they have been hurt by harsh words or contentious controversy. These things must be regretted and repented of. It is incumbent upon all confessing Christians to remain with the church and strive together for its peace, purity, and unity. As St. Paul has said, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). It is not unusual for some to claim, "I don't want anything to do with the modern church and all of its troubles; just give me the New Testament church."

But, I say, which one would that be? The Galatians were chided for embracing another gospel (Gal. 3:1). The Corinthians were steeped in divisiveness and perversity (1 Cor. 1:10; 3:1-3; 5:1). The Thessalonians were experiencing doctrinal confusion (2 Thess. 2:2). There were some at Philippi who could not agree (Phil. 4:2). Of the seven churches of Revelation all but two showed serious signs of fracturing. There never was and never will be a perfect church until we are all promoted to eternal glory. But the communion of the saints calls us to strive together to achieve by God's grace some measure of what we long for in our heavenly home. St. Paul said, "From him, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:16).

When we confess the communion of the saints we affirm our need to unite with the body of Christ. We acknowledge a mutual responsibility to share in the lives of fellow believers. The Greek word *allellos* is unusually translated "one another." Used repeatedly through the epistles, it captures the breadth of meaning bound up in the communion of the saints. We must "be devoted to one another in brotherly love" (Rom. 12:10). We must "honor one another" above ourselves (Rom. 12:10). We must "carry each other's burdens" thus fulfilling the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). We must "be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other," as Christ has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32). We must confess our sins to each other and "pray for each other" (James. 5:16). We must "love one another" (Rom. 13:8, refrain from judging one another (Rom. 14:13), edify one another (Rom. 14:19), admonish one another (Rom. 15:14), "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16; 2cor. 13:12), "have equal concern for each other" (1 Cor. 12:25), "serve one another" (Gal. 5:13), forbear one another (Eph. 4:2), "submit to one another" (Eph. 5:21), and "encourage one another" (1 Thess. 4:18). The communion of the saints speaks of our mutual love and common life in Christ. We must work it out and live it out before a watching world to the glory of God.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S MISSION?

"God intends his church to grow!" So said the lecturer in one of the many seminars I had taken on church growth some years ago. The course did not explore what the Bible said about the church. But it did send me away with oodles of practical ideas—a bag of tricks if you will—on how to organize for growth, increase attendance, and make my church stand out from the others. Much of the advice made good business sense, promising dramatic and predictable results. Perhaps, I thought, I could also pastor a church that would turn heads.

The problem I soon faced was one of integrity. The kind of pastor I was supposed to be to make it work was not the vision that compelled me to the ministry in the first place. I also came to grips with the fact that if this *was* the ministry, I did not want any part of it. The Bible did not teach these popular and proven methods as means of church growth. In fact, I have discovered over the years that the Biblical methods are clear, simple, timeless, powerful, and transportable to any culture or people. God indeed intends his church to grow. However, he intends it to grow not through the methods born of human wisdom, but those revealed in his Word.

Shortly before Jesus was crucified, he said to his disciples, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32). The mission of the church is the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ. He came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Thus the mission of the church is to lift up Christ through the ministry of the Word so that the Holy Spirit might draw people to saving faith and to unite with his church. In his book entitled, *The Church*, Edmund P. Clowney said, "Mission expresses the purpose for which Christ came into the world, and the purpose for which he sends us into the world."¹² When we seek to fulfill the church mission at home we call it *evangelism*.

¹² Clowney, *The Church*, 161.

When we do it overseas we call it *missions*. But, the two are fundamentally the same thing whether we cross the street or cross the ocean. In both cases, we seek to lift up Christ by preaching and teaching God's word, and forming churches made up of those who are drawn to him through the gospel.

Consequently, the church's mission concerns the message we proclaim. The gospel is a timeless message. It does not need to be reinvented each generation as the modernist church insists. We must get the gospel into the hearts and lives of God's people and spread it beyond the church as the world's only hope. St. Paul warned, "But if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:8). The gospel is the story of Jesus with the accent on his death and resurrection. It reveals the divine majesty of the Son of God. It is concerned not only that Jesus died, but why he died. He bore the penalty of the Father's just judgment for our sin upon himself. His own perfect righteousness is offered to us and received by faith. The gospel comes with an invitation to trust Christ alone for our salvation. Without him in our lives we are eternally lost. If we alter this message then we attract people on false pretenses. Paul said, "We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other we are the fragrance of life" (2 Cor. 2:15-16). It does no good to alter the fragrance of the gospel. The true gospel will attract the true sheep. A false gospel will attract wolves in sheep's clothing.

Furthermore, the church's mission also concerns the methods by which we proclaim the gospel. I often hear it said, "Methods are neutral. We must discard old methods in favor of those which are culturally relevant. People today are visual and can't endure a sermon or a lecture." This of course is not new. Rome was a visual world as well yet Paul insisted that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). The methods that generate enthusiasm are not the methods that generate faith; the methods which create excitement are not the methods which create life. These must not

be confused as is done so often in many Evangelical churches. I am not suggesting that Christian musicians should not sing songs, Christian writers should not write novels, or Christian artists should not apply their craft. A world flooded with Biblical notions through the arts help create a universe of ideas where the gospel is more apprehensible. But the mission of *the church* concerns methods as well as its message. We are taught to preach the Word in season and out of season; we are called to celebrate the Sacraments as the visible identifying marks of church members (Matt. 28:19); and we are to foster prayerfulness in the church's life and among its families. These so-called ordinary means of grace are the channels through which God grants his blessing unto life and growth. These are the things that the church alone can do that no other entity on earth can.

Finally, we must recognize that the church's mission concerns mercy ministries. St. Paul insisted, "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of God" (Gal. 6:10). The appointment of the office deacon in the Bible (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8-13) is dedicated to this task. Jesus summarized the Scriptures with these two commands: love God with a whole heart; and love your neighbor as yourself. With them he gave the parable of the Good Samaritan to drive home our obligation to help those in need as the Lord brings them to our attention (Luke 10:30-37).

Church ministry is not complicated. We do not exist to solve the world's problems. Our mission is not liberating the world's oppressed, or saving the environment from global warming, or even fostering understanding between world religions. It is the promotion and proclamation of the gospel and the gathering of the elect from the four corners of the earth into churches that exalt Christ. If our mission, message, or methods are wrong headed, growth may come but what grows may not be the church.

WORSHIPING THE LIVING GOD

Chances are that a recent high school graduate growing up in the

Evangelical Church today has never sung a hymn. Over the last several decades a huge theological shift has occurred in the church. One of the visible outcomes concerns how Christians worship the living God. These so-called “worship wars” are often cast as a battle between traditional tastes and contemporary tastes – the old generation and the new generation. Gone in many churches is the pulpit, communion table, and open Bibles on display – symbols of the centrality of the Word and Sacrament. In their place is the clutter of sound equipment, drum sets, and microphones – symbols of an entertainment industry. Even the language has changed. We the congregation no longer enter the sanctuary facing the chancel. Rather we come as an audience to an auditorium and watch the stage. Preaching as the authoritative proclamation of God’s Word is out; the style of a fire-side chat is in. In some cases more attention is given to creative drama, little girls dancing, music entertainment, and brash attention getting antics. And, what is said about the singing? Hymns are eschewed as too pedantic and complex. The repetitive, simplistic, and doctrinally banal chorus is preferred.

But is all of this simply a matter of preference? Is this new worship the way to reach the younger generation? My answer to both these questions is “No!” The issue before us regarding worship is theological. The dramatic changes reflect a shift in culture and church from God-centeredness (Reformed/Calvinistic) to man-centeredness (Pelagian/Arminian) in the modern church. With the latter in vogue our concern is how to attract people, not how to please God.

This is not new. Leviticus 10:1-3 relates an incident pertinent to our discussion. “Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command.” The result was swift and deadly. The reason the Lord gives is direct: “Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.” We are not told what this “unauthorized fire” was. But we *do* know that the Lord is not impressed with worship innovation. Every single example

of apostasy in the Old Testament was accompanied by a departure from prescribed worship (cf. 2 Chron. 28:2-4). Likewise every single example of revival and reformation began with a renewal of prescribed worship (cf. 2 Chron. 29:2-4). To be sure heartless worship is worthless (Isa. 29:13); but ill-formed worship does not come from the right heart.

We readily grant that under the new covenant the older forms of worship are fulfilled in Christ and no longer used. Although we do speak of new covenant worship in such old covenant terms as temple, sacrifice, priesthood, and festivals, we do not worship in this way. However, neither should we presume that we are now open to do whatever is to our liking. Although a specific pattern of worship is not set down in the New Testament, its rudiments *can be* clearly seen (cf. Luke 4:14-22). Perhaps Acts 2:42 comes as close to a pattern as any text. The believers in Jerusalem, we are told, “Devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” The “apostles’ doctrine” is the ministry of the Word. St. Paul appointed Timothy to this task in the church at Ephesus with these words: “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). “The fellowship” is the communion of the saints, the corporate gathering of God’s people for worship. The “breaking of bread” is the Lord’s Supper. By all accounts it was observed each Lord’s Day (Acts 20:7). Prayer was the people’s response. St. Paul notes that singing was to be encouraged as a means to express hearts filled with gratitude to God (Eph. 5:19). Prayers of contrition (Psa. 66:18) and intercession (2 Tim. 2:1-3) as well as confessions of faith (2Tim. 1:13-14) and sacrificial gifts (1 Cor. 16:1-2) are also urged upon the church. Entering by invitation from God (a call to worship) and departing with his blessing (a benediction) are strongly implied. Beyond these scripturally appointed “elements” we stand on very shaky ground.

New Testament worship is simple and spiritual (cf. John 4:24). It is scripturally formed and filled. Presbyterian Pastor J. Ligon Duncan has summarized Biblical worship with this motto: “Read

the Bible, preach the Bible, pray the Bible, sing the Bible, and see the Bible.”¹³ Like Biblical times, the Protestant Reformation was a reformation in worship. John Calvin, however, freely admitted, “I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his word.”¹⁴ We face the same difficulty today, especially now that a generation of Christians has been raised on an aberrant view and pattern of worship. The entertainment impulse is deeply rooted in the modern generation of worshipers. But does this new worship really reach the modern generation, or does it merely attract? There is a difference! John Calvin again observed, “There is a twofold reason why the Lord, in condemning and prohibiting all fictitious worship, requires us to give obedience only to his own voice. First, it tends greatly to establish his authority that we do not follow our own pleasure, but depend entirely on his sovereignty; and, secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions.”¹⁵

An ancient axiom in the church stated, *lex orandi est lex credendi et agendi*—prayer [or worship] is the rule of belief and action. In other words, our minds and our hearts are formed by the way we worship week after week—either rightly or wrongly. Thus true worship must be regulated by the Bible as well as ignited by the Spirit (John 4:24).

IS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP NECESSARY?

Several years ago a missionary friend wrote to me expressing his

¹³ J. Ligon Duncan III, “Foundations for Biblically Directed Worship” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2003), 65.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995), 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

sadness with the prevailing reluctance of many professing Christians to follow through with membership in Christ’s church. He asked me if I might have some pastoral insight in addressing the issue. In a lengthy reply I admitted my own frustration in broaching the propriety of membership in the church with God’s people. I responded in part, “Over the years I have found that... many...have a problem with this whole idea of joining a church. Perhaps it’s due to a fear of commitment or a distrust of authority. It certainly stems from our culture. We are radical individualists, tenaciously independent, and this has spilled over into our understanding of spirituality. There seems to be an unspoken sentiment...that we can do without the church. [It is thought,] ‘Jesus, my Bible and me is sufficient. The church only holds me back.’ Corporate spirituality, which I believe is absolutely necessary, is chaffed at.”

In my earlier days as a pastor I sought far and wide for that proof text that would say directly, “Thou shalt join the church.” But, alas, there is none. However, if we are biblical Christians, then the preponderance of biblical evidence can lead to no other conclusion. I offer here some of the reasons I gave my missionary friend why those who believe in Jesus must formally unite in membership with his church.

First, the doctrine of election presumes church membership. “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Tim. 2:19). Should we not also account officially for those who profess faith in Christ? Keeping lists is biblical. Paul kept lists of women in certain circumstances requiring special pastoral attention (1 Tim. 5:9-10). They were added to the list by meeting certain criteria (over 60, widowed, known for good deeds, etc.). Furthermore, we are told that God has recorded our names in the “book of life” (Dan. 7:10; Rev. 3:5; 20:11-14). Psalm 87:6 says, “The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: ‘This one was born in Zion.’” Are we then unbiblical when we do what God does—keep track of who’s who? Granted, we cannot know the counsels of God. But the church, if anything, is a gathering of “those who are his.” Should we not, then, make an attempt to formally identify “those who are his?” Should not

all who confess Christ stand up and be counted?

Second, the command to love one another presumes church membership. As a witness to the world Jesus told his disciples, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples” (John 13:34-35). St. Paul spoke similarly, when he said, “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, *especially to those who belong to the family of believers (emphasis mine)*” (Gal. 6:10; cf. 1 John 2:9-11, 3:17-18). If we have a special charge to love fellow Christians in particular, should we not identify those who “belong to the family of believers?” Is anyone who says, “I am a Christian” to be regarded as such if they are not willing to submit their profession to the elders of the church for examination and formally be received into the “family of believers?”

Third, the doctrine of ordination presumes church membership. The church’s leaders were to be chosen and elected by the people (Acts 6:3), and ordained by those currently in leadership (Acts 6:6). How do we determine who has a right to participate in that process if we have no membership? Furthermore, as members we are admonished to, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account” (Heb. 13:17). Which leaders are we to obey if not those whom we appoint formally and publicly? Of whom are elders held accountable if not for those who have taken vows of membership?

Fourth, the practice of church discipline presumes church membership. The Reformed Church has regarded church discipline as one of the marks of a true church along with faithful preaching and faithful administration of the sacraments. In the practice of discipline, sadly there are occasions when pastoral overtures and other measures do not reclaim one who has fallen into scandalous sin or grievous error. The end result is removal from the church (Matt. 18:15-20). If one can be *excommunicated* via formal process—and the process is indeed formal—does this not presume that one was previously *in-communicated* via a

formal process? The example of the sinner who was disfellowshipped, mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, is followed up in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 with his being received once again after his repentance. None of this makes any sense without acknowledging the reality of church membership.

Finally, the sacraments presume church member. Baptism, for instance, is not a casual affair. It is the formal marking out of one now identified with the church. In the great commission, Jesus commanded us to “make disciples” by “baptizing” them, and then “teaching” them. By this the church is formally and identifiably separated from the world. Furthermore, the Lord’s Supper is only for the church. As with circumcision and Passover, those who enjoy that which feeds our faith, must first be sealed with that which identifies our faith (Cf. Ex. 12:48). At the end of that first great day of Pentecost we are told, “Those who accepted [Peter’s gospel] message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41).

It is a great joy and privilege to belong to the church. Believers should regard membership as their Christian duty. We who claim to love Jesus, who is the head of the church, must also love his body which *is* the church. St. John has said, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers” (1 John 3:14). In other words, we know we have been born again because we love the church—our brothers and sisters in Christ. There is no greater Biblical way to show this love than to keep our membership current in the churches where we fellowship by God’s grace.

CONCLUSION

One immediate outcome of sin’s entrance into the world is that we must now contend with thorns. As a result of Adam’s disobedience, the LORD God told him, “Cursed is the ground because of you....It will produce thorns and thistles for you....By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food” (Gen. 2:17-19). Since the Fall all our efforts to promote God’s glory, whether in

producing a harvest of food or a harvest of righteousness, are encumbered by the presence of thorns—agents that destroy their environment. Thorns, like sin, are ruinous to the gardens in which they grow.

Yet, in the midst of the world's darkness and despair—in the midst of its twisted and gnarled morass of thorns—there grows a lily. This beauty is the world's one bright hope for it alone portrays "the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6) and of *him* it is said, "To him be glory in the church...throughout all generations for ever and ever!" (Eph. 3:21). This flower is the bride of Christ, and the bridegroom says of his beloved, "Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the maidens" (Song 2:2).

This lily stands out amongst the backdrop of sin's devastating effects. What's more, she alone resists the encroaching effects of sin in the world for Jesus insisted of his church, "the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). Her power lies in the truth which she bears for she is the "pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim. 1:13). Her adornment consists in her attributes of unity and purity along with those qualities that transcend place and time. She is distinguished from transplants and interlopers by such identifying marks as the ministry of the Word and Sacrament, along with office bearers who serve in Christ's stead. The faithful are drawn to her beauty and in so doing help fulfill Isaiah's vision that "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9). To Christ, his church is "the rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys" (Song 2:1). As a lover he looks upon her and swoons, "How beautiful you are, my darling" (Song 1:15, 4:1, 7). He calls her, "my garden, my sister, my bride" (Song 5:1). His description of her exceeds all human affection:

You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. How delightful is your love my sister, my bride! How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!...You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you

are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain...You are a garden fountain, a well of flowing water streaming down from Lebanon (Song 4:9-15).

If this reverie reflects even in a small way the love Christ has for his church, then we give far too little regard for that which he loves beyond measure. This "lily among thorns" is the church "which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Thus is it his "treasured possession" (Ex. 19:5; Deut. 14:2). Is it not then our duty to join her, study her, and, by God's grace, help advance her place in the world?