

## Members Only

By Michael S. Horton

Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Inc -

We all know someone who tells us, "I don't need to go to church. I worship God in my own way." In this issue of *Modern Reformation*, we will explore the idea of the church as it is instituted by God and understood in the modern world. But we must begin at the beginning, with the question: Do you have to go to church to be saved?

Granted, biblical material on this subject is thin. But that is only because early Christians, pressed on all sides by the threat of death, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42) Becoming a Christian in the ancient world was a dangerous step--one worth dying for, if necessary. People joined the body of Christ, not out of convenience, or to find a mate, but to give common confession to the Savior in Word and sacrament, in fellowship and in prayer.

During the more severe persecutions, some Christians questioned the prudence of being too overtly involved in the church when their activities were carefully scrutinized by the powers that be. Many even left the faith altogether, caving in to immense social and political pressure. Called the lapse (Latin for "fallen"), these folks were much in the mind of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another." The church, then, is the ordained institution for growth and maturation in Christ. Without it there are no ordained means of grace. In the church we are instructed, encouraged, nurtured, corrected, and comforted. There we receive the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion in the name of Christ. And only in the church do we regularly hear the proclamation of God's Word by servants who are suited to the vocation by their education and calling.

The Nicene Creed repeats Paul's reference to "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," when it declares, "I believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church." Calvin called this the invisible, or universal, church. There are many unregenerate members of the visible church who are not members of the invisible church. It is an error to say that one is a Christian because he belongs to the visible church. However, it is quite true to say that apart from belonging to the invisible, universal church one cannot be saved.

What happens when we are converted? Popular American evangelism often treats potential converts as individuals who need to accept Christ so they can have a happier, healthier life. Rarely is conversion presented as something that engrafts the new believer into the body of Christ, the True Vine. Opposing the individualist approach, the Bible speaks of being "baptized into one body." When someone trusts Christ, his relationship to God, and to all those who are Christians, changes.

I hear someone saying, "Wait a minute, I thought you said that we can't say so-and-so is a Christian because he belongs to a particular visible church. So why is belonging to a church essential?"

To answer that question I must expose what I think is the philosophy underlying the low opinion of the church many hold today. One reason people have a low view of the church is that organized religion has been more inept, corrupt, and unhelpful in recent history than usual. But there is a deeper, more pervasive cause at work here: the heresy of gnosticism.

Gnosticism was a late-first and early-second-century mixture of classical pagan mysticism and Christianity. Judaism's emphasis on the value of matter has historically distinguished it from paganism. The body is not an evil prison-house of the soul, as paganism declares, but a unique creation of God. Salvation comes not by escaping this earth or human institutions, but by making one's way through history, as on a pilgrimage. Christianity, the efflorescence of biblical revelation, confirmed the Judaic emphasis by affirming Christ's humanity as well as his deity, and his bodily resurrection as a down-payment on our own. In the New Testament, God uses water (baptism), wine and bread (communion), ink and paper (the Bible), a physical institution (the church), and creeds and confessions (doctrine) as means of knitting us together in Christ.

The ancient Gnostics saw no more need for these visible, physical, earthly elements than do their successors today. Gnostics believe the Spirit is all-important. Worship is spiritual and inward. When that belief is questioned, the standard answer is that to worship otherwise is unspiritual, earthly, carnal, or external. This heresy led many in the early church to question the importance of meeting regularly. After all, if the Spirit is everywhere, why can't I worship God on the beach? Why do I need all these external things like water, wine, bread, paper and ink, and an institution? After all, don't we remind people Sunday after Sunday, "The church is not a building"?

Philip Lee, in his book *Against the Protestant Gnostics* notes that, "Ancient gnosticism loathed the patriarchal and authoritarian qualities of official Christianity. From the gnostic point of view, the structure and discipline of the Church stifled the spirit." Against the Gnostics of his day, Calvin wrote, "Without the Church there is no truth, God is a liar, and everything contained in His word is false." In his commentary on Ephesians Calvin adds, "He errs who desires to grow by himself. Just so, if we wish to belong to Christ, let no man be anything for himself: but let us all be whatever we are for each other." Gnosticism breeds narcissistic individualism, but Christianity promotes mutual commitment to Christ, not only through the internal unity of the Spirit, but also through the external unity of Word and sacrament, fellowship, prayer, creeds and confessions. "What is crucial for American Protestantism is a clear understanding and a stubborn assertion of the truth that when Christians are born again, they do not enter again into their mother's womb, nestling back into the fetal position, free of this world's concerns, isolated from pain and trauma by a spiritual water bag." Lee concludes, "As opposed to the patristic and Calvinistic picture of the Church as a mother who nurses, comforts, scolds, punishes, in short, loves her children into a healthy maturity, the present image of Church is that of an organization that cashes our checks, mails us notices and newsletters, but otherwise leaves us to our own devices." Calvin went so far as to concur with St. Cyprian: "One cannot take God as His Father without having the Church for his mother."

The Reformers agreed that we should seek the reformation of the church, not its abandonment or destruction. This view differed from that of the Roman Catholics and the Anabaptists. The Roman Catholics insisted that the visible Church of Rome was infallible, and therefore incapable of requiring doctrinal reformation. The Anabaptists argued that the institutional church ought to be abandoned entirely, along with the world and most other earthly associations. Against the mere externalism and authoritarianism of medieval Rome, the reformers asserted that all baptized believers are priests, not only the ordained clergy, and that the church is the whole body of Christ. But against the mere internalism and individualism of medieval sects, the reformers declared that because all believers are priests, they have a duty to one another. And that duty is fulfilled in the universal, that is, catholic, institution Christ founded in Abraham. For nearly two millennia, believers have "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42)

Thus, we come full circle to our original question. Can a person be saved without joining a church? Now that we have a better handle on the philosophy behind the low view of the church in American Protestantism, we can answer the question, Does the Bible require church attendance? Without doubt, the answer is "Yes!"

Think of the numerous calls to discipleship in which Jesus called people away from their labors to learn from him and fellowship with him and each other. St. Paul insists that we are not merely baptized into Christ, but into his body, which is the church. In Reformed thought, there is a distinction and an inseparable connection between the visible and invisible church. One cannot claim to be a member of Christ's universal body unless he is also in fellowship with a local congregation of that body. As the marks of the true church are the Word rightly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, church discipline rightly exercised, so the marks of the true Christian are the Word believed, the sacraments received, and deference to legitimate discipline. (Church discipline as a necessary mark of a true church has been a distinguishing feature of the Reformed, rather than Lutheran, side of the Reformation tradition.) Thus the Belgic Reformed confession maintains, "We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it, no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition."

By custom, Christians have met on the first day of the week. This is by very early custom, since it was apparently practiced by the apostles. (Acts 20:7; Rv 1:10) Even if it is granted that there is no biblical command to meet on Sunday, there is clear biblical command for regular meeting. And if Sunday is the accepted time for normal engagement in these commanded activities, it stands by inference that regular church attendance at a properly instituted congregation is commanded if we are to be Christ's disciples.

This is the rule, but there are exceptions to every rule. The end of church attendance is not legalistic adherence to a "perfect attendance" record at the end of the year, but regular instruction, fellowship, and reception of Holy Communion. Without these activities, we die on the vine, languishing for the nourishment necessary to sustain the Christian life. As any honest person knows, it is difficult enough to be Christ's disciple, even with the church to guide and preserve us along the way. But to abandon this imperfect institution is to parachute alone into a desert wilderness where death is the only way out.

---

Dr. Michael Horton is the chairman of the Council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, and is associate professor of historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. Dr. Horton is a graduate of Biola University (B.A.), Westminster Theological Seminary in California (M.A.R.) and Wycliffe Hall, Oxford (Ph.D.). Some of the books he has written or edited include *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace*, *Beyond Culture Wars*, *Power Religion*, *In the Face of God*, and most recently, *We Believe*.