

Life in the Father's House: Why Should I Join a Church?

By Rich Lusk

[Note: This article was written in 1996 for the church newsletter of Redeemer Presbyterian (PCA) in Austin, TX, where I was serving at the time.]

By and large, the church today is in a real mess. Because so many churches are unfaithful and unfruitful, it is somewhat easy for us to assume the church is not essential to the Christian life. We end up with a love/hate relationship with the church, involving ourselves only when it seems to be to our convenience or benefit. But is this view, however prevalent, biblical? Should churches have formal membership? Does God require his people to attach themselves to a local church? Is it really all that important to take membership vows? Does membership “have its privileges,” and if so, what are they?

The biblical answer is clear. However, in order to see it, we must not allow ourselves to be blinded by modern assumptions. Admittedly, there is no verse that says, “Thou shalt join a church.” Nor such Scripture specify membership vows. For much of church history, a command would not have been necessary because it was obvious, and since there was generally only one church available in a geographic area (before the rise of the denominational system), it was not as if professing believers had to choose which of several available church options to take. If you were a Christian in a particular city, the local parish church was your church, and the pastor knew you were part of his flock.

The early Christians took it for granted that church membership was not an option. In Acts 2:47, we are told of the results of the apostles' ministry following Pentecost: “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” To be saved was inseparable from being added to the church; salvation and church membership were ordinarily regarded as two sides of the same coin. Church membership is certainly not a prerequisite of salvation, but it is a necessary consequence of it. No where does the New Testament sanction the idea that a person could trust in Christ for redemption but then refuse to join the church. There are no “lone ranger” Christians; no Christian can function as an “only child.” The Christian life is necessarily a social and communal life; the church is the place in which the Christian life is nourished and sustained. If we are united to the head, Christ, how can we not be united to his body, the church? Just as body parts severed from the body cannot live on their own, so a Christian cannot live apart from the community of faith. When God calls a person to himself, he also calls that person into the community of the saints. Those who refuse to join the church must be viewed as unbelievers because they are treating themselves as unbelievers (Matthew 18:15-20).

But why cannot someone be part of the church without actually joining a particular, local body? God commands us to submit to the authority of his ordained representatives, namely the elders of a local church. Hebrews 13:17 instructs us to, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.” But how can we obey our elders if we have not formally committed ourselves to a particular local church? The only way to obey this command is to be part of a church, with officers who are responsible for a defined body of people. Moreover, how can elders keep watch over the souls of their flock if they do not know who is in the flock? How can they give an account to God of those under their care if they are not clearly identified by church membership?

The church is pictured throughout the Old and New Testaments as the place of salvation. The Westminster Confession of Faith declares, “The visible church... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (25.2). Martin Luther, the great Reformer of the sixteenth century, stated that, “Apart from the church, salvation is impossible.” Fellow Reformer John Calvin also saw the necessity of the church. Calvin, along with Luther, was simply following the teaching of earlier church fathers, who followed the apostle Paul in affectionately viewing the church as our spiritual mother (Galatians 4:26). Calvin stated: “Because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let

us learn from the simple title 'mother' how useful, indeed necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off the flesh, we become like the angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been her pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom, one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation...God's fatherly father and the special witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church. The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of the Word and sacraments." This is the historic view: One cannot have God as Father apart from Church as Mother.

Why is the church central to Christianity? The church certainly has no intrinsic power to save sinners in herself. But the church is God's means of gathering and perfecting his people. The church is God's temple, built not with stones and mortar as the Old Testament temple had been, but built out of flesh and blood. Christians are the living stones that make up God's temple, God's unique dwelling place (1 Peter 2:4-8). The church is the covenant community, the true heir of all God's promises (1 Peter 2:9-10). The church is the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God that Old Testament saints longed to see (Hebrews 11:10, 12:18-24). When the church is faithful in preaching the gospel to the nations and administering the sacraments, not even the gates of hell can withstand her (Matthew 16:19).

With this background, it is understandable that we would be urged to not forsake "the assembling of ourselves together" (Hebrews 10:25). But this duty is not a burden. The psalmist longed to be in the presence of God and his people, and that desire is normative: "I will declare your name to my brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will praise you" (Psalm 22:22; see also Psalm 35:18, 122:1, 133:1-3). It is true that the church will never be perfect in history; she is growing and maturing through the ages. But we are called to bear one another's sins and burdens, pursuing peace and unity in the bond of the Spirit. The church is the bride of Christ; he died for her and continues to cleanse her until that day when she is perfectly glorified (Ephesians 5:25-32). In the meantime, we must not let the remaining impurities in the church keep us from her fellowship. In a sense, we could say the church is like Noah's ark – she may smell on the inside, but it sure beats drowning in the wrath of God on the outside. Why join a church? Because for all its problems, there is no other place to be a Christian and no other way to be a Christian.

Thus, while the church is not a mediator of salvation, the church is God's instrument of salvation. To her have been entrusted the Word and sacraments; through these means of grace, God grants his people eternal life. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is the catalyst of Christian growth. We come to church primarily to get, not to give; yes, we do give God thanks and praise when we assemble, but we come primarily to receive God's gifts offered to us in Word and sacrament. We only give when we have first received; our worship is simply the grateful response of God's people to his grace.

But there is another dimension to this truth. Not everyone in the church is saved. The Bible speaks of hypocrites (those who merely pretend to be Christians, but really aren't) and apostates (those who once pretended to be Christians, but have now shown their true colors). John spoke of those who abandoned the church, thus proving they had never been saved (1 John 2:19). We may not presume we are eternally secure just because we belong to a local church. While the life of faith requires the church, being in the church does not automatically guarantee one is being faithful. True Christianity combines the objective (the church community and her means of grace) with the subjective (a faithful response on the part of the individual believer).

The church may be far from perfect. Indeed, Redeemer Presbyterian is certainly far from perfect. But our hope is the grace of God, which formed the church, sanctifies the church, and will someday glorify the church. The church is the glorious body and beautiful bride of Christ. The church is God's temple, God's army, God's household. Thank God for the church, and thank God for bringing you into his church.

Quotes compiled by Rich Lusk

Therefore *he who would find Christ must first of all find the church*. How would one know where Christ and his faith were, if one did not know where his believers are? And he who would know something of Christ, must not trust himself, or build his own bridges into heaven through his own reason, but he must go to the church, visit and ask of the same...*for outside the church there is no truth, no Christ, no salvation*.

-Luther

When, according to Christian belief, lost souls are saved, the saved ones become united in the Christian Church...true Christians must everywhere be united in the brotherhood of the Christian Church.

-J. Gresham Machen

A man without a country (a citizen of no nation) would be considered an anachronism in civil society. A professing Christian who is not a member of any Christian body should be just as much a rarity. There are three institutions and three only -- family, church, and state -- that can rightfully claim the allegiance of every living person. He who refuses, or evades, enrollment in the church of Christ is a traitor to Christ as surely as he who refuses or evades duty to the land in which he lives is considered to be an enemy or a rebel. "He that is not with me," said Jesus, "is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad" (Mt. 12:30).

-Roderick Campbell

And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

-Acts 2:47

He cannot have God for his father who does not have the church for his mother.

-Augustine

Apart from the church, salvation is impossible.

-Luther

Because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title "mother" how useful, indeed necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Matt. 22:30). Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation....*God's fatherly favor and the especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church*.

The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a *traitor* and *apostate* from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments.

-Calvin

[God] mercifully chooses to speak to us through the Church. The Church is therefore, according to Calvin, a divinely ordained institution, whose purpose is to accomplish among us the work of the risen and exalted Christ, who, having, instituted certain ordinances, wills that we recognize in them His divine presence. Those who disdain the fare the Church provides when the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments rightly administered deserve to 'perish from terrible hunger.' In keeping with his patristic and medieval heritage, Calvin treats such people as children who despise their own mother's milk.

-MacGregor

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.

-I John 2:19

It is clear that in the days of the apostles it was universal practice to receive believers into the visible church.

What could be more logical? He who believes in Christ is united with Christ. Faith binds him to Christ. He is a member of Christ's body, the invisible church. But the visible church is but the outward manifestation of that body. Every member of the invisible church should as a matter of course be a member of the visible church...

The Scriptural rule is that, while membership in the church is not a prerequisite of salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation. Outside the visible church "there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (WCF XXV.2).

-Kuiper

First, all safety resides in Christ alone; and then we cannot be separated from Christ without falling away from all hope of safety; but Christ will not and cannot be torn from his church with which he is joined by an indissoluble knot, as the head of the body. Hence, unless we cultivate unity with the faithful, we see that we are cut off from Christ.

-Calvin

It is worthy of observation that none but the citizens of the church enjoy this privilege [of having their sins forgiven]; for, apart from the body of Christ and the fellowship of the godly, there can be no hope of reconciliation with God. Hence, in the creed we profess to believe in *the Catholic Church and the forgiveness of sins*; for God does not include among the objects of his love any but those whom he reckons among the members of his begotten Son, and, in like manner, does not extend to any who do not belong to his body the free imputation of righteousness. Hence it follows that strangers who separate themselves from the church have nothing left for them but to rot amid their curse. Hence, also, an open departure from the church is an open renouncement of eternal salvation.

-Calvin

The spouse of Christ cannot be adulterous; she is uncorrupted and pure. She knows one home; she guards with chaste modesty the sanctity of one couch. She keeps us for God. She appoints the sons whom she has born for the kingdom. Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated

from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If anyone could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside the Church. The Lord warns, saying, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who gathereth not with me scattereth" (Matt. 12:30). He who breaks the peace and the concord of Christ, does so in opposition to Christ; he who gathereth elsewhere than in the Church, scatters the Church of Christ....He who does not hold this unity does not hold God's law, does not hold the faith of the Father and the Son, does not hold life and salvation.

-St. Cyprian

We receive our faith from the Church and keep it safe; and it is as it were a precious deposit stored in a fine vessel, ever renewing its vitality through the Spirit of God, and causing the renewal of the vessel in which it is stored. For this gift of God has been entrusted to the Church, as the breath of life to created man, to the end that all members by receiving it should be made alive. And herein has been bestowed upon us our means of communion with Christ, namely the Holy Spirit, the pledge of immortality, the strengthening of our faith, the ladder by which we ascend to God. For the Apostle says, "God has set up in the Church Apostles, prophets, teachers" (I Cor. 12:28) and all the other means of the Spirit's working. *But they have no share in this Spirit who do not join in the activity of the Church...* For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every kind of grace. The Spirit is truth. Therefore those who have no share in the Spirit are not nourished and given life at their mother's breast; nor do they enjoy the sparkling fountain that issues from the body of Christ.

-St. Irenaeus

[The Church] is an institution founded by Christ, proceeding from his loins and animated by his spirit, for the glory of God and the salvation of man, through which alone, as its necessary organ, the revelation of God in Christ becomes effective in the history of the world. Hence, out of the Church, as there is no Christianity, there can be no salvation.

-Schaff

As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, so we firmly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be, one Kirk, that is to say, one company and multitude of men chosen by God, who rightly worship and embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only Head of the Kirk, even as it is the body and spouse of Christ Jesus. This Kirk is catholic, that is, universal, because it contains the chosen of all ages, of all realms, nations, and tongues, be they of the Jews or be they of the Gentiles, who have communion and society with God the Father, and with his Son, Christ Jesus, through the sanctification of his Holy Spirit. It is therefore called the communion, not of profane persons, but of saints, who, as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, have the fruit of inestimable benefits, one God, one Lord Jesus, one faith, and one baptism. *Out of this Kirk there is neither life nor eternal felicity. Therefore we utterly abhor the blasphemy of those who hold that men who live according to equity and justice shall be saved, no matter what religion they profess.* For since there is neither life nor salvation without Christ Jesus; so shall none have part therein but those whom the Father has given unto his Son Christ Jesus, and those who in time come to him, avow his doctrine, and believe in him. (We include the children with the believing parents.) This Kirk is invisible, known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen, and includes both the chosen who are departed, the Kirk triumphant, those who yet live and fight against sin and Satan, and those who shall live hereafter.

-Scots Confession

There is therefore great need today for laying fresh emphasis upon the doctrine of the Church.... We must correct the widespread notion that Christianity is merely an affair of the individual soul.... We must therefore teach men afresh that the blessings of the Gospel cannot be enjoyed by the single individual in his singleness, but only in his incorporation into Christ's Mystical Body, the Holy Catholic Church.

-John Baillie

The visible Church, which is also catholic and universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, *out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.*

-WCF XXV. 2

No man is a schismatic for removing from one congregation to another, but he that shall separate himself from all church communion, and shall rend himself from the catholic church, he is schismatic, he is an apostate.

- Samuel Hudson

So closely does Calvin identify incorporation in Christ with incorporation in the church that he regards the activity of the church towards its individual members as being identical with the action of Christ towards the individual. The response of the individual to the ministry of the church is thus identical with his response towards Christ. Under certain conditions the authority of the church is nothing less than the authority of Christ himself, and obedience to Christ involves obedience to the church.

-R. S. Wallace

They who wish to become partakers of so great a benefit must be a part of Israel, that is, of the church, out of which there can be neither salvation nor truth.

-Calvin

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

-Second Helvetic Confession

Lawful excommunication...is the cutting off from the body of Jesus Christ, from participation of His holy Sacraments, and from public prayers with His Church, by public and solemn sentence, all obstinate and impenitent persons, after due admonitions, which sentence, lawfully pronounced on earth, is ratified in heaven, by binding of the same sins that they bind on earth. The danger is greater than man can suddenly catch hold of: for seeing that without the body of Jesus Christ there abideth nothing but death and damnation to mankind, in what estate shall we judge them to stand that justly are cut off from the same?

-Scottish Form of Excommunication

The Cyprianic formula, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, is vital to the Reformed tradition...The Church [is] the one Body of Christ on earth and the unique instrument of Christ's redemptive process...Only in the Church can we be ingrafted into Christ and fed by him so that we become organically united to Him and to one another. As there is but one Christ, so there is but one Church. There is no other place whither we may go to find the life that He alone can and does impart.

-MacGregor

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, *not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together*, as in the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

-Hebrews 10: 24-27

Such as forsake the church...wholly alienate themselves from Christ.

-Calvin

The Lord has not promised his mercy, save in the communion of the saints.

-Calvin

There can be no greater privilege than to be regarded as belonging to the flock and people of God, who will always prove the best of fathers to his own, and the faithful guardian of their welfare.

-Calvin

It is obvious that for Calvin the sanctification of the individual, and the growth, nurture, and discipline of his Christian life take place within the life of the church, and the attitude and loyalty of the individual towards the church is an extremely important factor in this matter...Our salvation within the church is constantly furthered by the mutual care which the members, gathered together in one body under the same head, have for each other...Our sanctification flows from our election and incorporation into the membership of the church...Sanctification is therefore a work which God accomplishes in his providential dealings with the church, and in this respect also we participate in sanctification not as isolated individuals but especially within the fellowship of the church and as members of the church, for it is in such fellowship that our lives can be made outwardly conformable to the death and resurrection of Christ...Calvin identifies departing from the church with 'falling away from the living God'...He says, 'They cannot be God's disciples who refuse to be taught in the church.'...Calvin, of course, would warn us that as individuals we must not rest our confidence of salvation in the mere fact of belonging to the church. It is vain to belong to the church if we have of ourselves no living connection with Christ through faith and prayer."

-R. S. Wallace

Whosoever tears asunder the church of God, disunites himself from Christ who is head and who would have all his members united together...We thus understand that God ought to be sought in order to be rightly worshipped by us; and also that he ought to be thus sought, not that each may have his own peculiar religion, but that we may be united together, and that everyone who sees his brethren going before, excelling in gifts may be able to follow them, and to seek benefit from their labors. It is indeed true that we

ought to disregard the whole world, and to embrace only the truth of God; for it is a hundred times better to renounce the society of all mortals, and union with them, than to withdraw ourselves from God; but when God shows himself our leader, the prophet teaches us that we ought mutually to stretch forth our hand, and unitedly to follow him.

-Calvin

Better to belong to the worst possible congregation than to no church at all.

-Torrey

It is a dangerous temptation to think there is no church where perfect purity is lacking...Anyone who is obsessed with that idea, must cut himself off from everybody else and appear to himself to be the only saint in the world -- or he must set up a sect of his own along with other hypocrites.

-Calvin