

Reformation Now

Theological Questions Answered in a Nutshell

Belonging to the Visible Church OR Why is Church Membership Important?

The present age is one which is marked by an attitude of rank individualism. By this is meant that the individual becomes the most important aspect in any given situation. The clearest Biblical expression of this is found in the book of Judges – “Every man did what was right in his own eyes!”

Such individualism is marked, generally, by: i. Denial of objective truth; ii. Isolationism; iii. A direct stand against lawful authority.

Within Christianity this attitude is usually expressed by a rejection of authority and the need to become a member of the Institutional Church. Proponents of this Christianised individualism typically point to the sky and say, “I am a member up there; no need to join down here!” Such an attitude is beautifully pietistic. It sounds very holy indeed, and, as such, is extremely enticing. Sadly, it is an attitude not countenanced by Scripture or our Fathers in the faith.

Consider the following statements:

A. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the **holy catholic Church**, the communion of saints.¹

B. We believe in one **holy catholic and apostolic church**.²

C. We believe and confess **one single catholic or universal church**—a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers ... The church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end. We believe that since this holy assembly 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.³

D. What do you believe concerning “the holy catholic church”? I believe that the Son of God through His Spirit and Word ... from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself **a community** chosen for eternal life and united in true faith.⁴

E. What is God’s will for you in the fourth commandment? First, that the gospel ministry ... be maintained and that ... I **regularly attend the assembly of God’s people** to learn what God’s Word teaches.⁵

F. The visible church ... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, **out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation**.⁶

It is obvious that these documents all avow the existence of and the necessity of belonging to the visible Church. From the earliest and simplest creeds to the later catechisms and confessions, the Church has spoken with one voice—“Christ has His Church in all ages and men are obliged to join with Her to have any hope of salvation.”

Importantly, we must note and focus upon the two references which state that salvation is nowhere to be found outside the Church. This may seem harsh to the modern mind, but it is so because we have a diminished view of important Biblical doctrines. Take salvation as an example. We tend to use the term *salvation* today in terms of a person’s initial profession. Scripture views it predominantly from the point of completion in the consummation. Enter the conundrum of the “Now and the Not-Yet.” We are saved, but we are to be saved. We have not yet realised the fullness of our salvation, although we have it all potentially.

¹ Apostles’ Creed.

² Nicene Creed (325)

³ The Belgic Confession. Extracts from Articles 27 and 28. (1561)

⁴ The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 54. (1563)

⁵ The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 103.

⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith. 25:2. (1645)

So what does this have to do with Church membership? Simply this. God, through the Spirit and Word, has shown us that our salvation is not complete (Phil 2:12). We must grow in sanctification (1 Peter 2:11). We must re-train our thought patterns (Romans 12:2). We must bring every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

Where do we find the tools and help necessary to work toward and achieve these goals? We find all things necessary within the Church (Eph 4:11-13). God has appointed approved preachers to proclaim His Word for the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of saints.⁷ He has also appointed officers to His Church to guard, protect, feed, and encourage the sheep of His pasture. “To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power ... to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the Gospel.”⁸

Another way to formulate this in order to gain a clear concept is to think of a society such as ours. We live in peace when we all confirm to the law of the land and honour the authorities that are over us. Those who despise this rule and promote rule by self are termed as anarchists. In the same way we will do well to remember that the Church is Christ’s society. We are His people under His rule. He has formed us into a people (1 Peter 2:9-10); He has given us His law; He has appointed shepherds; He has given all the necessary tools and graces to the Church (Romans 8:32).

To continue the analogy we must ask: Are we willing to accept God’s rule and publicly identify with His Church or are we committed to being the religious anarchist who makes every attempt to cast aside Christ’s order and rule? Membership of the visible Church declares our willingness to bear the name of Christ; accept God’s rule; submit to His shepherds; work to strengthen our brethren; and to run earnestly and diligently the race before us by making the best use of every grace God has given.

We must also realise that Church membership has an eschatological perspective. God is redeeming His people. This people are set apart; they are a holy priesthood. This peculiar people are gathered out of the world and are constituted not simply as a new society, but as the true society. The process begun will be brought to a consummation. The community gathered in time will be consecrated in covenant for eternity.

We have wrongly allowed our perspective of the Church to be ordered by individualism. Consequently, we see the Church as a gathering of individuals. We see it as nothing more than a club; a gathering of like minded individuals. By contrast we should see ourselves as one. We are a people. Note well that God is not gathering persons, He is redeeming a people. We are the bride (singular) of Christ. We are a body (singular) in which the various parts exist and contribute.

To deny membership in the visible Church is to want to live as a divorcee or as an amputated digit. It is a demand to live apart from a covenant covering and cut off from the flow of life.

This truth must be as much of a challenge to those who do not believe in Church membership as it is to ministers and elders. To the former, it is a call to obey God and His teaching. To be amongst God’s flock in a safe and healthy environment, rather than scattered, alone, lost, vulnerable. To the latter, this truth is a solemn call to undertake your pastoral duty with all diligence and care.

Sheep should not hold themselves willingly from the protection of the Master’s manger. Neither should the sheep be exposed to danger and be scattered through careless pastoral oversight.

The Church is the “house and family of God out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

⁷ Westminster Confession 14:1. See also 10:1.

⁸ Westminster Confession 30:1.