

Church Membership Course
United Reformed Church of Nampa, Idaho
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***The Concept of Church Membership
and the Marks of the Church***

Biblical Background to the Concept of Church Membership

It is not unusual today for people to conceptualize their Christian experience in atomistic, individualistic, or isolationist patterns of thought. They subordinate the corporate dimension of Christian living, taking the attitude that the concept of “church membership” is either absent from Scripture or of little consequence. Accordingly, “church” is thought of and treated by most Americans as an individualistic, spectator sport – without commitments, without oversight, without discipline.

God’s word, however, defines Christians as those who follow the voice of the Good Shepherd and thereby become part of His flock [John 10.3-4, 11, 14-16, 27-28] guided by His undershepherds, the elders [I Peter 5.1-4]. The corporate character of salvation is evident in the New Testament. To be a Christian is to be incorporated into “the people of God” [I Peter 2.9-10], to enter “the kingdom of Christ” [Col. 1.13], to become a “fellow citizen of the household of God” [Ephesians 2.19], to be one among many “living stones making up a spiritual house” [I Peter 2.4; Ephesians 2.20-22], to function as a member of “the body of Christ” [I Corinthians 12.12-27].

Scripture tells us that from the earliest days of the church, people were “added” to a body of believers [Acts 2.41, 47; 4.4], a body distinguished from a larger social group which merely came into contact with gospel preaching [Acts 5.11-13]. This body of believers to whom converts were added were set apart from the general public by being called “the household of faith” [Galatians 6.9-10].

It is precisely those who are members of this household who are legitimately recognized as voting for its officers [Acts 6.3-5], participating in the Lord’s Supper [I Corinthians 10.17; 11.20-22, 29], utilizing the church court [Matthew 18.17; I Corinthians 6.4-5], being subject to its discipline [I Corinthians 5.12], and uniting as many members into the one body of Christ, serving each other [I Corinthians 12.7, 11-27].

What is it that distinguished those who were members of the household of faith from other people? The biblical answer is that: (1) they were publicly recognized as professing faith in Christ, (2) they were united in a lifestyle of self-sacrificial love for each other, and (3) they placed themselves under the shepherding discipline of the elders [Acts 2.44; 4.32; Hebrews 13.17]. This is what we mean today by “church membership.” The initial, outward signs of joining with the body of Christ, the church, are public profession of faith in Christ and baptism [Matthew 28.19; Acts 2.37-42].

Does Scripture Make Church Membership Strictly Required?

If someone is unwilling to bow to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and obey His instructions, then that person should not honestly consider himself a Christian [Matthew 7.12; Luke 6.46; John 14.15, 23; Hebrews 5.9]. And among those things which the Lord requires of those who are His followers is that they publicly profess faith in Him [Matthew 10.32; Romans 10.9], visibly subject themselves in service to one another in the unity of the Spirit [Ephesians 4.3-7, 16; 5.21], and give obedience to the leaders of the church [Hebrews 13.17]. Notice that these are all commands from the Savior; each is a moral requirement. Since obedience in such matters is precisely what we defined above as becoming a “church member,” it follows logically that it is indeed a moral requirement for a Christian to be a member of the church.

Isn't It Enough to be Part of the “Invisible” Church?

The “invisible” church is the set of all the individuals who have been [or will be] spiritually saved by Jesus Christ; it is comprised of the elect. This includes people we do not see – past saints who have died, Christians in other parts of the world, and those with whom we come into contact unaware that they believe in Christ; it excludes those who make a show of being Christians or church members, but who do not truly know Christ as Savior and Lord. Thus it is called “invisible.”

When someone is joined to Christ in salvation, he is spiritually a member of “the invisible church,” the company of the saved. Isn't this enough? Why should there be any need for visible and formal membership in an organization on earth called “the church?” The answer to this question is found by simply observing the way in which the New Testament speaks of the “church” of Jesus Christ: it is something which exists visibly, tangibly, externally, and identifiably in the midst of human society as an institution located in certain definite places.

That is why the Bible speaks with plurality of “churches” [eg. Acts 15.41; 16.5; Romans 16.4, 16] as separate and identifiable societies in particular places [eg. Revelation 2.1, etc.]. These local societies are responsible for certain things which are clearly external and visible: for instance, to avoid schism, to show care for one another, to exercise given ministries, and to submit to authorities within the church [I Corinthians 12.14-27]. Regarding “the church” Scripture speaks of many things which are not merely “spiritual or invisible” – things like “behavior in the church” [I Timothy 3.15], the church being told things [Matthew 18.17], the church adjudicating matter [I Corinthians 6.5], the church demonstrating unity [Ephesians 4.3-16], the church feeding widows [I Timothy 5.16], the church being given pastors [vv. 11-16] and being governed by elders [Titus 1.5-7; Acts 14.23; 20.17, 28; Philippians 1.1].

We have not done justice to the textual evidence in God's word if we are concerned merely with the “invisible” company of the saved, and not also with what the Bible calls “the church” of Christ as an external society or institution with a publicly acknowledged membership, visible functions, observable responsibilities, and a discernible authority structure. Our responsibility is to be identified with a local, visible church.

What Constitutes an Organization as a “Church”?

There are groups of people made up of believers [for the most part, anyway] and/or aiming to accomplish certain Christian goals [eg., evangelism, fellowship, education, social reform]. They may be very worthwhile and good organizations, but this does not constitute such groups as “the church.” The church has a definite character, definition, and full-orbed function according to the teaching of the Bible. There

are certain marks of the church which [taken as a whole] distinguish it from other social groups. These defining marks of the church are:

1. Adherence to apostolic doctrine [Acts 2.41-42; I Timothy 3.15; Galatians 1.6-9; Romans 16.17-18; II John 9-11].
2. Administration of the sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper ["breaking bread"] [Acts 2.41, 42, 46; Ephesians 4.5; I Corinthians 11.20].
3. Discipline in purity, harmony and good order [Acts 4.35; 5.9-11; 6.1-7; 15.1ff.; Matthew 16.19; 18.17-20; I Cor. 5.2, 7, 11, 13; 6.1, 4, 5].
4. Inwardly, fellowship in worship toward God and mutual concern for His people [Acts 2.42, 44-47; Hebrews 13.15-16; I Corinthians 12.7-27].
5. Outwardly, service toward the world in evangelistic outreach [Acts 2.40, 41, 47; Matthew 28.18-20] and seeking transforming holiness in every area of life [Romans 12.1-2; I Peter 1.14-16; Colossians 1.9-23; Matthew 5.14-16].

Is Any "Church" Perfect in These Areas?

No. But any organization which is a true manifestation of the church of Jesus Christ will display all of these marks in some degree. To be sure, there will be greater or lesser purity from church to church in each of these areas. All churches have their individual strengths and weaknesses. It is our responsibility to work toward greater fidelity in every area.

Some organizations have become so deficient or degenerate with respect to some of the above marks, however, that they can no longer be deemed true manifestations of Christ's church on earth. From them Christ removes their "candlestand" [Revelation 2.5], or they become unwitting "synagogues of Satan" [Revelation 2.9]; they do not correspond to "the Jerusalem which is above" [Galatians 4.25-26]. They no longer qualify to be called a church of Christ.

“I Don’t Want to Join the Church!”

Robert B. Strimple

I have frequently been asked, by someone who either sees no need to become a church member, or who even claims to have conscientious scruples against becoming a member of a particular Christian congregation, "What is the biblical basis for the idea that every Christian should be a member of a Christian church?" Below is a letter I once wrote in response to such a question. I have reproduced it here in case it might prove helpful to others.

Dear _____,

A full answer to your question would require a long presentation of the biblical view of church government, because that is really what is at stake here. How there could be any meaningful church government without church members is beyond my comprehension! But to get into the whole question of church government is more than I can attempt here if I am to respond to your question promptly. What I shall try to do now is to "demystify" the concept of church membership. Sometimes, personal communication is more helpful than the one-way communication of a letter, however. Feel free to phone me at the seminary's number or write to me again at the seminary.

For example, you don't say in your letter why you refuse to become a member of any church. I think it would be helpful to discuss together your reasons. As one who is in union with Christ by the powerful working of his Spirit through repentant faith, you are, of course, a member of that church which is Christ's body (1 Cor. 12). Sometimes a Christian believer responds to that reminder this way: "Yes, and that's the only church I care to be a member of!" And that can sound quite spiritual. But remember how clearly it is brought out in the New Testament that that church whose membership list is known with perfect accuracy only by God is a church that is also visible in this world. The apostle Paul knew where it was located—in Corinth, in Galatia, in Philippi, etc.—and he knew who its officers (elders/overseers and deacons) were. Otherwise, of course, he could not have written letters to them!

And Paul speaks in his letters of the responsibilities of those officers, and the responsibilities of those who are to submit to the proper authority of those officers. You might ask: "Where in the New Testament does it speak of church members?" I submit that all the New Testament passages that speak of the congregation's officers (and there are many such passages) assume that the congregation is a specific entity, a definite group of believers among whom those officers function as elders/overseers or deacons, and the congregation is composed of individuals recognized as the "members" of that congregation (or whatever you want to call them).

Who is being addressed, for example, when the writer to the Hebrews commands them: "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17)? Obviously (I think it is obvious), it is the members of the congregations whom the "leaders" lead who are being addressed. Are you fulfilling this biblical command? Who are your leaders? Do they know that they are your leaders, that you are among those for whom they must give an account to God? Have you ever told them that you recognize those elders as being your elders? If you have, then you have "applied for membership," because that is all that phrase means. And your acknowledging their servant-leadership role in your life as the elders of your local church would seem to be a minimal requirement if they are to keep watch over your soul "with joy"!

In your letter, you complain that your local church's elders have said that you must become a member before you can participate in the Lord's Supper with the congregation. Please understand that as those who must give an account to the Lord, the elders believe it is their duty to make it quite clear that the Lord's Table is for the Lord's people only (1 Cor. 10:14-22; 11:17-32). That does not mean that the Lord's Supper is for the members of that local congregation only, and that is why in most biblically ordered churches you hear the pastor say that membership in some local church that bears the marks of a true church is what is required. (The marks of a true church are that the gospel is preached, the sacraments are properly administered, and biblical discipline is exercised.)

But membership in some local church is required. Why? Because, as I've already said, the Lord's Supper is for the Lord's people. But why then, you might ask, is a profession of faith in Christ not sufficient? It is sufficient. But it must be a credible (believable) profession of faith, not a mere uttering of the words. As I'm sure you are aware, there are many people today who profess faith in Christ, but who give no evidence of a saving knowledge of the true Christ. Indeed, their lives seem to deny the reality of their profession. It is the responsibility of the elders to make clear what is a credible profession of faith, and to keep the testimony of the church pure by requiring a believable profession of the members of that congregation that meets together as the Lord's people at the Lord's Table. This is a solemn responsibility.

Otherwise, the credibility of the individual's profession is left solely to the individual himself or herself. Everyone is left to "do what is right in his own eyes," and all proper order, discipline, and consistency of witness is destroyed. The New Testament speaks of church discipline, of admitting to, or excluding from, the fellowship of the church. And that assumes a recognized "membership" (or whatever you want to call it).

In your letter, you say that you find it difficult to understand why a "non-church-member" is denied admission to the Lord's Table. I myself find it impossible to understand how a Christian can remain a nonmember of the visible church of Christ and think that he or she is fulfilling the Lord's commands about submitting to the elders who are commanded to "shepherd the flock of God among you" under the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:1-4). A "Christian, but not a member of the church," is a contradiction in terms, an abnormality that needs to be put right as soon as possible.

May I urge you in love, as a brother in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, to go to your elders in Christian love and tell them you want to serve your brothers and sisters in that congregation with whatever gifts the Lord has given you, to worship with them, to pray with them, to live with them, to really function as a member of Christ's visible church in this concrete, visible world. And tell them that you therefore want to take the first step by making your public profession of faith before them and being baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (if you have never been baptized). Then, not simply as an individual, but as a member of the body, you can be built up through participation at the Table of the Lord. Meditate upon Ephesians 4:11-16 and try to imagine how different the church would be if we were not all members together of the one body!

Why Join a Church?

Rev. Gary Matlack

This may sound like a silly question, but the truth is that lots of churches don't include any kind of formal membership as part of church life. The reasons for this vary. Some churches see formal membership as too structured, too rigid. "Why burden people with that requirement," goes the argument. "We're all just here to worship Jesus." Just as too much structure can hinder the movement of the Spirit, it can hamstring the congregation.

Others, no doubt influenced by the church growth movement, see formal membership (particularly as it is based on doctrinal standards) as detrimental to numerical growth, even divisive. Such "restrictions" are too likely scare people off.

Still others see formal membership as downright un-American. What better way to dampen rugged individualism than by urging someone to commit to a group (even if it is a group of believers)?

If you've been worshiping at our church, you know that formal church membership is part of what we do. During our worship time, we've had new members join by baptism, profession of faith, reaffirmation of faith, and transfer. In each case (explicitly in baptism, profession and reaffirmation, and implicitly by transfer), new members pledge themselves to believe and uphold the doctrines of the church, to pursue godliness, to submit to the church's leadership, and to serve the body of Christ. It is a joyous thing to behold!

Maybe that's different from your religious background. Perhaps you don't think formal membership is all that important. Maybe you haven't thought much about it at all. So, just in case you're still stewing on the legitimacy of church membership, here are a few reasons why we think it's important:

1. *God commands it.* The author of Hebrews wrote, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25). God wants us to assemble as his people-to hear his Word preached, to partake of his sacraments, to revel as a community in the glories of Christ and his gift of redemption. When God delivered the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage, he assembled them in the wilderness as a worshiping community. Each Lord's Day the redeemed in Christ assemble to reflect on our redemption and receive what we need to sustain it. Formal membership is our response to God's call to assemble. It is our commitment to gather with his people and worship him.

2. *It's an acknowledgment of God's choosing us and calling us in Christ.* Church membership is, first and foremost, God's doing. He chose us. He sent his Son to die for us. His Spirit indwells us and is sanctifying us. He has united us to himself and to all other believers. Formal membership is the natural outcome of God's redeeming us. It's our grateful acknowledgment that God has called us out of the world and into his covenant community. It's a recognition that he has placed us where we can grow in grace. Through church membership, we voice our dependence on the means (Word and Sacrament) that God has appointed for our sanctification.

3. *It promotes the purity of the church.* To be a member of our congregation, one has to agree with our confessions, which summarize the contents of Scripture. This sets up a system of unity and accountability for worship, teaching, leading and living in the church. And in cases where departure is severe enough, it

allows for church discipline, which is designed to correct and restore erring brothers and sisters and protect the church from apostasy.

4. *It signals our submission to Christ's rule over his church.* New members agree to submit to the governing structure Christ has set in place over his church—namely ministers, elders and deacons. By formally joining the church, we are recognizing that Jesus, the Head of the Church, rules and reigns through the means of church government, and that he has ordained a sovereign order to the life of his church. By the way, church officers are also members. That means they agree to govern and to teach their fellow Christians according to what God has said in his Word. So, formal membership aims to curb both anarchy and tyranny.

5. *It promotes community and downplays individualism.* Formal church membership heads off the "Just Jesus and me" mentality by declaring our belief that God is our God and we are his people. We pledge ourselves to the glory of God and to the good of his church. By pursuing his truth. By using the gifts he has given us. By "having all things in common" with those he has redeemed by his blood.

We realize that at any given time, some people sitting in the pews are in a "check it out" mode. Nothing wrong with that. We encourage people to know what they're getting into before they join. But if you're convinced of the truth of our confessions, if you confess Christ and are nourished on him when you attend our worship services, if you see yourself as not only united to Christ by faith but also united to his people, then why tarry? Join us. Take the steps toward formal membership. And say by your public profession what your heart and mind know are true: "I belong to Christ and to his church."

Church Covenant

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God, to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God, angels and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this Church in knowledge, holiness and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline and doctrines; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the Church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations.

We also engage to maintain family and secret devotions; to educate our children in the Christian faith; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment, to avoid all tattling, backbiting and excessive anger; to seek God's help in abstaining from all drugs, food, drink, and practices which bring unwarranted harm to the body or jeopardize our own or another's faith.

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.

We moreover engage that when we remove from this place, we will, if possible, unite with a church where we can carry out the articles of this confession and the spirit of this covenant.

Finding A Church: A Brief Guide For the Discriminating Worshiper

By Michael S. Horton

"How can I find a church where I will hear Christ preached from his Word, without all the fluff and distractions?" That is a question I have asked myself on many occasions. It is easy to understand the concern and even frustration that accompanies the search for the right place to worship. First, as with product labels, it is important to recognize what church labels mean and don't mean.

Reading Labels

If you were raised in Europe, choosing a church might not be so difficult. After the Reformation, each denomination was given its own "sphere," so that if you were born, for instance, in an Italian canton in Switzerland, you would be Roman Catholic, while a person born in French-speaking Geneva would probably be Protestant. Sometimes whole nations (or the ruling monarch's family line) shared a common confession: The Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Church of Sweden, the Dutch Reformed Church, and so on.

When America became the haven for groups that wanted to "start over" in the New World, bring the Gospel to natives, and escape persecution in their state churches, many simply brought their Old World understanding of regional state-churches. For instance, the New England Puritans established Congregationalism and barred Quakers and Roman Catholics from citizenship. This was actually more civil than the policy pursued in Europe at the time, where dissenters were arrested and sometimes even executed.

By the time our nation was founded, however, it was clear that there would be no officially state-sanctioned church for the American republic, but that Americans would be free to follow their consciences. This arrangement, with all its benefits, has nonetheless created a free-for-all in which denominations compete for souls. This freedom fueled the creation of hundreds of new sects and cults in the nineteenth century-everything from Mormonism, Christian Science and Jehovah's Witnesses to health-food cults, radical Pentecostal sects, and groups that drew their membership by making predictions about end-times prophetic events. The last two centuries have been an exercise in cafeteria-style spirituality, or what a friend in England calls free-enterprise religion. The issue is not so much truth, which ought to be defended and passed on, but "whatever works for you;" in other words, selecting a church is a matter of taste.

This explains the labels' origins. How do we read them? First, there are the traditional Protestant denominations that built and shaped most of America's institutions well into the twentieth century: the Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Reformed (Dutch, German, Hungarian, French), Episcopalians, Baptists, Lutherans and Methodists. The first major break in Protestantism came between the Lutherans and the Reformed, but other Protestant denominations (Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Episcopal) are part of the Reformed or Calvinistic family tree (note: while Arminian Baptists often trace their lineage back to Anabaptism, Calvinistic Baptists regard themselves as those who dissent from Calvinism only on the issues related to covenant theology and the sacraments). In other words, they shared a common belief about God, humanity, Christ, salvation, and other essentials, but they differed on other important issues. For instance, Congregationalists believed that the churches should be independently governed by the congregation; Presbyterians argued that the New Testament word "presbyter," meaning "elder," implies a form of church government based on brother-elders in a given area ruling the churches, and the

Episcopalians insisted on a hierarchy of pastors (bishops) over other pastors (ministers). Historically, the form of church government, and not disagreements over the way of salvation, has divided these churches.

In the 1800s revivalism and frontier individualism led to an explosion of cults and sects. Self-proclaimed "prophets" drew many people away from traditional Protestant churches and many of these are now established groups: the Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Cumberland Presbyterians, and a host of Pentecostal groups. Pietistic groups (mostly of Lutheran descent) added divisions to the ranks. They came to believe traditional Protestantism lost its first love by emphasizing doctrine. These includes the Brethren denominations, Free Churches (Evangelical Free, Evangelical Covenant, etc.), and a host of independent Bible churches that were born over the last century and a half. Many of them officially adopted the dispensational theology of J. N. Darby by the mid-twentieth century.

Meanwhile, the traditional Protestant denominations themselves began to tolerate and then embrace the Enlightenment, with its belief in human goodness, natural explanations for everything, and the rejection of the need for divine intervention, revelation, or salvation. During the first half of the twentieth century, these "mainline" denominations experienced major schisms. This has contributed scores of new denominations to the religious landscape. For instance, in the Presbyterian family alone, where there was once one Presbyterian Church in America, there are now many: the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA), which is the largest and, generally speaking, the most liberal body; the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the largest of the groups separating over liberalism; the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), a doctrinally conservative Calvinistic body which was the first group founded in the separation from the PCUSA; the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPCNA), also known as the "Covenanters," with their roots in Scotland, consisting of those who believe that Scripture requires the singing of Psalms only and without instrumental accompaniment; and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), which is committed to a less doctrinally defined position on the specifics of reformed theology. The Korean-American Presbyterian Church (KAPC) is also a significant denomination and is quite conservative on Scripture but with considerable latitude in worship and the interpretation of Reformed distinctives. While there are many splits in American Protestantism, there is also a constant ecumenical drive to reunite divided churches, so long as there is a common orthodox faith. Many of the denominations just mentioned enjoy close fraternal relations.

The Reformed denominations are closely affiliated with the Presbyterian ones; in fact, the tradition is often called "the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition." Many churches in Europe are part of the "regional churches" mentioned earlier. They have a different history-not because of doctrinal differences, but because they came from a different ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and historical background. For instance, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), the oldest Protestant denomination in America, has its roots in the Dutch Reformed Church. The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) was brought to North America by those who belonged to a more orthodox Reformed denomination in Holland. As more recent immigrants (from the late 19th century to the present), CRC members were generally much less aware of, much less infatuated by, American evangelicalism (i.e., revivalism). However, that is changing and the CRC now accepts contemporary worship styles, controversial church growth programs and the ordination of women to all offices.

As a result, many churches left the CRC. At first, some remained independent, while others founded the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church (OCRC). In recent years, the United Reformed Churches (URC) was founded as an effort in part to unite churches of the Reformed confession and to reach out to non-Dutch communities.

There are smaller ethnic churches, such as the Korean Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS), with roots historically in the German Reformed Church. The RCUS

refused to enter the United Church of Christ, which was a mid-twentieth century attempt to unite Congregationalists and the Evangelical (Lutheran) and Reformed Church.

That brings us to the Lutheran family tree, which is considerably easier to explain. The largest Lutheran denomination is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the result of a merger of the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC). The second largest is the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, which is much more doctrinally confessional, that is, true to its confession of faith. The Wisconsin Synod is, generally speaking, even more conservative.

With the exception of the Reformed Episcopal Church (REC), which separated from the mainline denomination over creeping Roman Catholic, "high church" influences, Episcopalians in America, much like their counterparts in England, Canada, Africa and Asia enjoyed unity until recently. The growth of liberalism led to the formation of a "church within a church" called the Episcopal Synod of America, which is a non-geographical jurisdiction that would allow a traditional Anglican in Detroit to be ordained by an evangelical bishop in Dallas, if his Detroit bishop is a liberal churchman. This coalition is still within the mainline denomination, but meets separately and carries on its own activities. The group consists of traditional Anglicans, who oppose liberalism and in most cases the ordination of women, and is a mixture of those who are low-church (evangelical) and high-church (Catholic) in their leanings.

Congregationalists generally do not have a confession of faith or catechism. Presbyterians use the Westminster Confession and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms; the Reformed use the "Three Forms of Unity"-the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort; Lutherans use the Book of Concord, which includes the Augsburg Confession, and they employ Luther's Smaller and Larger Catechisms; the Episcopalians have the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion for their confession. Each of these confessions and catechisms was written during or just after the Reformation. To the degree that a denomination or church judges its preaching, teaching, worship, and church life by these standards, it is "confessional." Most mainline churches today either ignore their confession or allow their ministers and officials to reject their official confession of faith. Many conservative evangelical off-shoots do the same, not from an outright rejection of sound teaching so much as an apathy toward doctrine, creeds, confessions, and the catechetical instruction of youth. In both cases the result is the same: A generation of professing Christians that is unaware of its own beliefs enough to be able to question and search.

Be careful not to read labels too closely. For instance, although the United Church of Christ (not to be confused with the Churches of Christ or the Disciples of Christ) is the nation's most liberal denomination, judging by its avant-garde policy-making, it may be possible to find a decent UCC parish in your neighborhood. In fact, it is possible that a PCUSA (mainline) congregation in the neighborhood might actually be more committed to the Reformation faith than a church that belongs to a more conservative evangelical branch of Presbyterianism. It is not likely, but it is possible. You can't always judge a church by its name these days!

Make Sure Your "Church" Is A Church

Until this century, Christians of all types believed that there are true churches and false churches. Just because it says "church" over the door doesn't mean it is one. That is why the reformers drew from Scripture two undeniable marks of the true church: It is where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered.

To be sure, the reformers knew that this happens in varying degrees. For instance, even in a conservative Protestant church, one might be disappointed with the handling of a certain text. One might be absolutely convinced that the preacher was in error in his explanation. But that does not mean that an otherwise sound church should no longer be regarded as a true church. The reformers meant that it had to be a

church in which the clear preaching of the text focused on Christ's promise to save sinners. In other words, the preaching of the Law and the Gospel must be clearly affirmed and proclaimed in the local parish, if it is to be considered a true church. When a denomination or a church officially rejects the Gospel or any essential teaching of the Nicene Creed, it commits apostasy and is no longer part of the visible body of Christ. Individuals within it may be saved, but the congregation or denomination has officially severed itself from Christ's visible church.

The second mark of a true church is that the sacraments are affirmed and employed alongside the Word as a means of grace. Traditionally, Reformed, Presbyterian and Lutheran Protestants have argued that "rightly administering the sacraments" surely entails infant baptism and the rejection of any view of the Lord's Supper which reduces it to a mere symbol or memorial. Again, this does not mean that people who disagree with this definition are not really Christians; it is a question of what properly constitutes a rightly ordered, visible church.

If a church fits these definitions, you may want to overlook other problems. When taste, rather than truth, is the criterion for choosing a church, people will place music style, programs, and children's activities at the top of the list. The most essential issue is this: Is this a place where God and his revelation in Christ's person and work is clearly declared, and where people are serious about growing in Christ through Word, sacrament, prayer, evangelism, and missions? Is this a place where my children will be trained in addition to the instruction they will receive in the home? Will they grow up hearing the Gospel?

Down To Brass Tacks: What Do You Ask The Pastor?

If you can't judge a church by its label, how can you judge it? Here are some questions to ask the pastor:

What is the church's view of Scripture? Is it infallible, the only ultimate authority for faith and practice?

What is the church's confession of faith? Where does this particular minister stand on it and is it the criterion for the teaching and preaching of God's Word? If you really get "lucky," you might even find a church that still uses its catechism. A confession of faith is not equal to Scripture, but it does set forth what the church body believes God's Word teaches and expects us to know. A catechism is simply a means of instruction about that confession of faith, usually through a question and answer approach, with biblical texts supporting each answer. In many confessionally consistent denominations, one may find Sunday school curricula that follow a person all of the way from pre-school age to the twilight years. This is important, because it organizes our thoughts about God and reading of Scripture into a coherent, clear, and systematic whole.

Is the service conducted as God's meeting with his people to give them his grace and for them to respond in thanksgiving? Or is it modeled on entertainment?

Is Jesus Christ proclaimed as a moral hero or as redeemer? In other words, is he made to sound like Freud, Ben Franklin, a politician, and an end-times seer, or is the preaching concerned with "Christ and him crucified," as Paul put it?

If You Must Leave

Reformation Christians don't throw the baby out with the bath water in their rejection of the errors of Romanism. We still have a high doctrine of the church, and that is what makes it exceedingly difficult to leave a church or denomination that is corrupt. Often it is difficult to decide when the time comes to separate. If a local congregation departs from the faith, is it legitimate to stay on to try to change it, so long as the official confession of faith has not yet been finally rejected? I believe it is, and that God calls

us to hold our churches and denominations accountable to their own confession. So long as this remains the official confession of faith, it is assumed that everyone in the ministry of that denomination agrees with its articles. If not, the individual ministers who, with their mouth, vow to preserve the confession are in fact doing the very opposite and are therefore dishonest. You are not the one who has to leave, because you are being faithful to the church's confession of faith and until the denomination officially repudiates that confession, you are certainly free (but not required) to remain in it in order to bring it back to a practical confidence in that faith. Here, depending on the denominational polity, a process of graded church courts provides for orderly and just reforms.

Many readers may be part of a non-denominational church that does not have a formal statement of faith. How can you hold your minister to the preaching and teaching of the evangelical message if, by his own reading of scripture, he is convinced of another interpretation, no matter how strange? This is a more difficult situation. If the Word is not correctly preached (that is, a clear affirmation of the essential beliefs) and the sacraments are not correctly administered, with the ministers being accountable to someone besides themselves and their admirers, it is not a true church. Abandoning a sect is not only tolerable, but necessary. Reforming a church is difficult enough, but if a gathering of believers is not biblically minded enough to call itself a "church," and does not wish to think in that direction, the wisest move would be to prayerfully search out a church that is trying, feebly or faithfully, to be a true church. Whatever you do, resist the temptation-and it will be great-to abandon or reduce your attendance at church. This is not an option for the believer, although it is very attractive, especially when settling for the local menu is sometimes so unappealing.

A final note on this point. If you must leave, do so with charity and civility. Do not be noisy about it, making your departure a matter of the public record. Follow your conscience, but realize that the reason others may not see things your way is that they are simply not persuaded yet of the convictions that have motivated your move. You will need prayer, wisdom and advice at times like these.

Seeker Sensitivity

Finally, make sure the church you choose is "seeker-sensitive." This has become the new buzzword in church growth circles, and it is usually used as an excuse to legitimize the evacuation of all meaning, liturgy, dignity, and sense of transcendence and God-centeredness. The church is redesigned to meet the felt needs of the unchurched. After being asked what kind of church they would like to attend, the modern church marketing experts tell pastors how to build them.

So why should I suggest that the church you select be "seeker-sensitive?" In John four, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth." Notice that just as we place our confidence in our own denomination or congregation as the true church, Jesus tells us that it is not a matter of which mountain we worship on, because now God resides in the body of Christ, which is the church. God says worship must be in Spirit and in truth. That is, the Spirit and the Word must go together. There can be no activity of the Holy Spirit independent of the Word, and any activity of the Word depends on the Holy Spirit for its effect.

To be sure, we must be seeker-sensitive, but there is a very important distinction here: God says that he is seeking worshipers. The modern church growth concept is founded on the error of Arminianism, that man finds God. So we cast aside worshiping God by his criteria (the Holy Spirit and truth) in order to be seeker-sensitive. After all, we are the ones who save people and bring them into the kingdom, right? That

is the assumption. But if God is the seeker, our duty is to find a congregation where God is pleased with the worship, even though the message or style may be foreign or even offensive to the unchurched. If it is, it may be due to our personality or it may also be due to the Word of God simply doing what it does. If that's the case, we are in good company with the apostles, martyrs, and reformers before us.

Don't Go to Church!

Thomas E. Tyson

Most folks in the United States don't go to church. Forty percent never attend church at all, and more people were not in a worship service on the last Lord's day than were. For tens of millions of our countrymen, Sunday is a day to sleep in, have a continental brunch at a restaurant, and then settle in for an afternoon of football and beer. Church services are considered boring, irrelevant, and worth neither the effort nor the cost.

Now, if Christianity were purely an individual matter, if there were no fourth commandment, and if God hadn't given any instruction regarding church attendance, then the behavior described above might be OK. But Christians are not isolated individuals who just happen to share a common destiny. Rather, they are the body of Christ. Furthermore, the Sabbath commandment, which sets apart one day in every seven as a day of rest and worship, is still binding. And, the Bible does have something to say about church attendance:

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Heb. 10:25)

One of the chief blessings and duties of Christians, as members of God's church, is corporate worship—going to church. Why, then, is this article entitled “Don't Go to Church”? If there's anything we ought to *do*, it's go to church, isn't it? Well, there is a sense in which merely *going* to church misses the point of what we're all about as Christians. We don't help people to understand their privileges and responsibilities as church members merely by hammering away at their lack of attendance at worship services.

The Point

The Bible teaches that church members are not so much people who *go* to church, as people who *are* the church.

Someone might suggest that such a passage as Psalm 84 seems to encourage, if not command, church attendance. Doesn't it describe the blessedness of being in (vss. 1–4), of going to (vss. 5–8), and of putting first (vss. 9–12), God's temple? Yes, it does. But that is not the same as saying that we are to be in, go to, and put first the church's worship service. The New Testament counterpart of the Old Testament temple is not the church's worship service at all—it is Jesus Christ himself! *He* is the temple of God among us (cf. John 1:14). Thus, Psalm 84, while not dealing directly with the question of church attendance, does underline for us the importance of our union with Jesus Christ. Use of the phrase “going to church” might betray a view of the church that lacks this biblical perspective. In its primary biblical sense, the church is not a building, or even a worship service within that building, to which one goes.

What the Church Really Is

If the church is not a building or a worship service, what is it? Fundamentally, the church is *people* in union with God through Jesus Christ.

Consider the apostle Paul's description of the church:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours... (1 Cor. 1:2)

Notice how, with successive brush strokes, Paul paints a picture of the church, showing its characteristics: *the church* (unity) *of God* (owner) *in Corinth* (visibility); *those sanctified in Christ Jesus* (blessedness), who are *called to be holy* (purpose), *with all those everywhere* (universality).

What does this mean to you? It means that you need to become, if you are not one already, a member of that one church of God by exercising faith in Jesus Christ and by confessing your faith publicly in a local congregation of God's people. You will be baptized, as a sign and seal of God's saving ownership of you. If you were baptized as an infant, you have been a member of the church from your birth. Now that you are old enough to understand these things, it is your responsibility to confess faith in Jesus Christ. When you do that, you will be permitted to partake of the Lord's Supper.

You are a member of Christ's body, the church! So, being a good church member—bringing praise to the church's Head—is important. You don't go to church. You, together with all of God's people, are the church.

Holiness

One of the chief characteristics of the church is holiness. We read:

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple. (1 Cor. 3:16–17)

We said that Jesus himself is God's temple. Thus, the church, Jesus' body, is also God's temple, in which he lives by his Holy Spirit. That temple is so dear to God's heart that he warns any would-be destroyers of the church that he will destroy them. That temple is holy because Jesus is holy, and so everyone who is united to him is holy, too. That's why Christians are called "saints," which means "holy ones." In themselves they are not holy, but in Christ they are holy.

The holiness of the church involves members who are spiritually alive—a people in covenant with God, separated from the world for him. That church, bonded to God by a sovereignly administered transaction sealed in the blood of Jesus, is sacred.

It is important that the church's holiness be maintained in the admission of members, in the selection and conduct of church officers, in the mutual admonition of members, and in the official discipline of the church. Why? Because God's honor is at stake. The church is where his Spirit lives, the place where he has caused his name to dwell. Do you remember the third commandment and God's warning to those who take (bear) his name in vain?

Fellowship

Another defining characteristic of the church is fellowship.

While visiting the churches of Macedonia (in northern Greece), the apostle Paul had the privilege of observing church fellowship up close. What happened was that those churches insisted on contributing to a diaconal fund for the relief of persecuted believers in Judea. Later, Paul encouraged the church in Corinth (in southern Greece) to follow the example of the Macedonians:

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. (2 Cor. 8:3-5)

When Paul speaks of their “sharing,” he uses a word that is often translated “fellowship.” Church fellowship is not eating together, or playing together, or feeling oneness. Those things are the fruit of fellowship, not its root. The root of fellowship is God’s love, which is reflected in his children as they love their brothers and sisters. Look at the terms that Paul uses to describe the fellowship that characterized the Macedonian church: fellowship gives (“they gave”), fellowship gives gifts (“as much as they were able”), and fellowship is itself a gift (they “pleaded...for the privilege”). The church is God’s creation, to show forth the glory of his grace. God loves the church. That love produces fellowship, in Christ, among all the members of that body. That’s why you cannot help but see something of God’s love when you see loving, active fellowship in the church.

Going to Church

“But, still, can’t I go to church?” you ask. Yes, of course, you may! But remember that if there is to be any *going* to church, it will have to be, truly, going to *God*. Remember, therefore, when you do go to church, that it is a privilege you have, by grace, and that there is a purpose for worship. Jesus is the temple, the priest, the sacrifice, and the veil. He is everything. In him, together with all the saints, you are made the church. “Going to church,” then, is a family matter. You are not your *own* family, but *God’s* family.

We’re altogether too individualistic in these democratic United States. Do your own thing! The *family* that prays together, stays together. What church do you *attend*? But God gathers his elect in Christ, making them his church. Make sure that you are in Christ—if you are, you *are* the church.

Is it Our Moral Obligation to Attend Church?

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

For The Record

This regular feature is an attempt to provide an elementary Biblical analysis of various topics in Christian theology and practice. We anticipate that this and future contributions will be helpful in explaining fundamental theological issues to those who may be relatively unfamiliar with them.

Attending church is far from being the chosen Sunday activity for most people in our culture. This should not surprise us, of course, when those who sleep in, go to work, or find other recreations in the place of attending church are unbelievers. Unregenerate hearts do not seek God or find pleasure in worshipping Him. What is surprising (and dismaying) is that today many professing *believers* also neglect the corporate worship of God.

Why is this? On the one hand, some Christians see church as just one of many personal options along with Sunday brunch, the ball game, etc. On the other hand, some Christians consider informal fellowship groups or Bible studies an adequate replacement for church attendance. But all Christians must be open to the teaching of God's holy word, and it is to this standard that we turn for an answer to our original question.

Old Testament Law, Piety, and Prophets

The Mosaic *law* commanded God's people to gather together for corporate worship and the hearing of God's word (e.g., Deut. 12:5-12; 31:11-12). Indeed, the law of God required that the weekly Sabbath in particular be a "*holy convocation*" (Lev. 23:3). Regardless of outward circumstances (e.g., seventh-day Sabbath, a localized central tabernacle), the worship required in the Old Testament law entailed the basic moral element of assembling with God's people to hear His word and praise His name.

The religious *piety* of the Old Testament saint was evident in his desire to "Render unto Jehovah the glory due unto His name, bring an offering, and come before Him; Worship Jehovah in the beauty of Holiness" (I Chron. 16:20; cf. Ps 96:8-9). The believer is eager to worship in the midst of the assembled people of God. David the Psalmist wrote, "*I will declare Thy name unto my brethren; in the midst of the assembly will I praise Thee*" (Ps. 22:22). "*I will give Thee thanks in the great assembly; I will praise Thee among the people*" (Ps. 35:18; cf. 116:12-17). Many of the psalms emphasize the fact that David worshipped along with a congregation of other believers (e.g., Ps. 42:4; 55:14; 122:1; 132:7).

David's inspired testimony shows that his desire for congregational worship is normative for all God's people. He declared to all believers; "O come let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before Jehovah our Maker" (Ps. 95:6), "Come before His presence with singing...Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Give thanks unto Him and bless His name (Ps. 100:2,4), "Let them exalt Him also in the assembly of the people, and praise Him in the seat of the elders" (Ps. 107:32). "*Praise ye Jehovah, Sing unto Jehovah a new song and His praise in the assembly of the saints*" (Ps. 149:1).

Old Testament *prophecy* likewise shows us that those who are true believers will desire of assemble with God's people to hear His word and praise His name in congregational worship. For instance, Isaiah the

prophet indicated that converts to the Lord would join themselves to the corporate worship of God's people in "*Jehovah's house of prayer*" (Is. 56:6-7; quoted by Jesus in Mark 11:17).

One of the burdens of Malachi's prophecy was that the corrupt worship among the Jews of his day would, in the future age of God's advent, be replaced with pure worship among the Gentiles in every place (Mal. 1:11; 3:3-4).

Therefore, the *law*, *piety*, and *prophecy* of the Old Testament all combine to point us to our moral obligation to gather together with God's people for worship.

"But that was the *Old Testament*, with its Jerusalem temple and seventh-day Sabbath," someone might complain. This complaint diminishes the full authority of God's inspired word. Referring to the Old Testament, Paul taught "*every scripture*" is inspired and is profitable for...instruction in righteousness? (2 Tim. 3:16). Of course, changes from the covenantal administration and foreshadows of the Old Testament to the redemptive realities of the new Testament must be recognized (much of the book of Hebrews serves this very purpose).

Nevertheless, Jesus obliges us to submit to the continuing validity of "every jot and tittle" of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17-19), and Paul teaches that "whatever was written previously in the Old Testament was written "for our instruction" (Rom. 15:40. In that light, we would naturally expect that the moral obligation of corporate worship which is taught in the Old Testament will continue into the New. God continues to call a people for himself in the New Testament, and God surely continues to be worthy of their praise.

The New Testament Normative Example

Regarding the Old Testament Sabbath, New Testament believers confess that Jesus Christ is "the Lord of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28). In the New Testament age, it is thus appropriately called "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10). Scripture shows that since the Lord's resurrection, this day has been changed from the last to the first day of the week.^[1]

Regarding the Old Testament temple, New Testament believers confess that they themselves now constitute "*the temple of God*" wherein God's Spirit dwells (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). The outward trappings of Old Covenant worship have changed in the days of the New Covenant. The basic moral obligation of "*holy convocation*" has not.

The early church of Jesus Christ regularly gathered together as "God's temple" for corporate worship, daily at first (Acts 2:46) and eventually weekly on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2), "*the Lord's day.*" the early church did not break with the long standing requirement, revealed previously in God's word, for believers to participate in worship assemblies - even when they saw their *New Covenant* practice (outwardly changed) against the background of the *Old Covenant* pattern.

The priestly ritual of the temple has passed away, to be sure; yet, God's New Covenant people looked at their practice of worship in the light of it. For instance, "*through Him (Christ) then let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of lips which make confession to His name*" (Heb. 13:15), or again "*you are a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 2:5).

From various indications in the New Testament we learn what constitutes the congregational worship of the New Covenant people of God. It includes at least the following items:

1. Praise to God (Heb. 13:15; 1 Peter 2:9 [Is. 43:21]),
2. Corporate Prayer (1 Tim. 2:8; Cf. Phil. 4:6) With Congregational Amens (1 Cor. 14:16),
3. Hymns (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19),
4. Scripture Reading (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13),
5. Preaching (1 Tim. 4:6-16; 2 Tim. 4:2; Acts 20:7-9).
6. The Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42; 20:7; Cf. 1 Cor. 11:20).

We should remember that God's word is normative for us; it is a law, even when not prefaced with a formula such as "*Thou shalt do...*" What we find in the New Testament practice of worship, accordingly, is the standard of worship to which we must adhere.

Worship is defined, not by personal whims and religious imagination, but solely by the revealed word of God (cf. Col. 2:23). Thus the second commandment forbids us to devise, use, or approve of any religious worship which is not instituted by God Himself - as well as prohibiting us from neglecting, or taking away from, that worship which God has ordained (Ex. 20:4-6; cf. Lev. 10:1; Deut. 4:2; 32:46; Matt. 15:9; 28:20).

Therefore, our obligation to gather with God's people for worship must be understood and measured by the elements of New Testament worship set forth above. If we are doing what God requires of His people, we engage in worship assemblies which are characterized by praise, corporate prayer, hymns, Bible reading, authoritative preaching, and the sacraments.

Worship Assemblies are Not Just Any Gathering of Believers

In the New Testament, those assemblies which constituted the corporate worship of God were understood as something clearly distinct from informal household fellowship and eating, even though the worship assembly may have been in an actual home. Paul distinguishes between "the Lord's Supper" at the assembly and the ordinary meals in one's house (1 Cor. 11:20, 22).

Being in "the church" at worship is, thus, something more than any normal gathering with other believers - even if at the gathering we engage in eating, singing, and prayer. This is evident from the way Paul speaks, for instance, in 1 Cor. 14:35. He differentiates the situation of a woman asking question at "church" from her asking them "at home."

Moreover, despite the fact that "the church" is the body of believers (i.e. the people), Paul uses the following language: "it is shameful for a woman to speak in the church." The expression "in the church" cannot mean within any gathering of believers, or else women would be prohibited from ever speaking when other Christians are present! "In the church" obviously denotes the assembly of believers for the special purpose of ordained worship.

Worship assemblies for Christians are to be characterized by good order, not confusion (1 Cor. 14:26, 33, 40). Thus New Testament congregational worship is led and governed by the overseers (elders who "take care of the Church of God," 1 Tim. 3:4-5). That this is the rule for New Testament worship is illustrated by the fact that Paul wrote to deliver instructions for the life of the church, including its corporate worship services, *to pastors* like Timothy (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:1,8,11; 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2).

These pastoral letters had as one of their purposes that men "may know how they ought to conduct themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God" (1 Tim. 3:15). In short, the assembling of God's flock is under the oversight of the shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-2) who "preside" over it in all matters, including worship (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Acts 20:28).

Assembling For, and Participating in, Worship is Explicitly Required

The new Testament normative pattern, then, is for God's people to gather together on the Lord's day as "the church" for the specific purpose of worship as defined by God's word (praise, corporate prayer, hymns, Scripture reading, authoritative preaching, and the Lord's Supper) under the oversight of the elders.

It is nothing less than the moral obligation of believers to attend these worship assemblies and not have other interests or activities take priority over them - precisely because assembling for worship is a matter of obedience to God's word, rather than personal discretion.

The New Testament, no less than the Old, requires us to assemble for the purpose of worship. This was the apostolic pattern, as we see in these words: "If therefore the whole church be assembled together..., so he will fall down and worship God, declaring that God is among you indeed" (1 Cor. 14:23-25).

The New Testament explicitly commands that we not voluntarily absent ourselves from the church's recognized gathering for ordained worship. *"Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works, not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another"* (Heb. 10:24-25).

When we miss attending the church's worship service or do not participate in its activities, we are not living up to the Scriptural command for us to stand together in worship: "that with one accord you may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:6; cf. Eph. 5:19-21). It is expected that believers will regularly partake of the Lord's Supper (Jn. 6:53; 1 Cor. 10:17; 11:24-26), and when it is served, the New Testament exhorts believers to (examine themselves and thereby) actually participate in the eating and drinking (1 Cor. 11:27,28).

We conclude by seeing, therefore, that congregational worship is not a matter of entertainment and personal discretion (e.g. "shall we go to church or brunch this morning?"). Nor is it an informal get-together with other Christian friends where religious activities take place (e.g., "we met at their house, sang together and prayed"). God's holy and authoritative word says more.

Scripture makes it our moral obligation not to forsake the assembling of God's flock "as the church" for the specific purpose of corporate worship, as defined by the Lord, under the leading of the shepherds. If we profess to obey Him in all things, let us not be lax or self-willed especially at this important point! It is the highest privilege of the Christian to stand with fellow believers as God's redeemed people, in His presence, to render to Him the praise, adoration and worship which are due to His name. It is preparation for eternity.

[1] The Old Testament festivals of firstfruits and Pentecost (looking forward to Christ's resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit) were celebrated on the first day of the week (Lev.23:11, 16, 35, 39). Likewise, the new creation began on the first day of the week, having been brought about by Christ's resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20-28; 2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 1:13-19).

2. That is, a time of instruction based upon God's revealed word. This entails a number of things, including:

- (1) "exhortation" (PARAKLISIS; Rom. 12:8; 1 Tim. 4:13; 1 Thess. 2:3; cf. Acts 13:15; 1 Cor. 14:3; Heb. 13:22), which involves beseeching men in earnest (e.g., Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 5:20);
- (2) "teaching" (*didasko*; Acts 18:11; 1 Tim. 4:13; 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:2; cf. 1 Cor. 14:9), which includes authoritatively laying down the truth (1 Tim. 4:6) and delivering commands (1 Tim. 4:11); and

(3) "proclamation" (*karusso*) - a word which was used to cover a wide variety of discourses; the preaching of the prophets to God's people (Joel 2:1 LXX), synagogue lessons among the Jews (Acts 15:21; Rom. 2:21; cf. Lk. 4:19, 21; Mk. 1:39; Acts 9:20), evangelistic heralding to unbelievers (Matt. 4:17; 20:7, 27; Lk. 24:47; Acts 8:5; 1 Cor. 1:23), and the declarations of the full theological system to *believers* (Acts 20:20, 25, 27), proclamations *within* the Christian assembly (2 Cor. 11:4), words entailing comfort and exhortation among *converts* (1 Thess. 2:9-14) or against heresy in the congregation (1 Cor. 15:11ff.), and pastoral addresses to professing believers who are tempted to turn away from sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:2-4).

The recent, novel opinion that authoritative preaching of a sermon (exhortation or lesson monologue) is inappropriate within a Christian assembly of believers has no linguistic or theological basis in Scripture, as we see above. Note the example of Paul in Acts 20:7-9. We read that he "discoursed"; according to Kettle, the Greek word refers here to "the delivering of religious lectures." Further, we read that Paul continued his "speech" past midnight; the Greek word (LOGOS) does not (especially unqualified, in the singular, and with definite article) mean dialogue or joint discussion, but an individual's oral presentation, message, or statement (cf. Mk. 2:2; Matt. 15:12; Lk. 1:39; Jn. 4:41; Acts 10:44; 15:32).

The Necessity and Usefulness of Creeds

By Jeffrey Meyers

It might seem overly dramatic to some, but it is nevertheless true, if we are going to be faithful to the Bible itself, we *must* use "human" creeds. It is *not* just that creeds are permissible and biblical, but the Bible *demand*s that we publicly express our faith in concise, accurate, and intelligible language, which is precisely what creeds attempt to do. This is an important point. When someone asks you, "What do you believe as a Christian?" you must respond with a summary of what you believe the Word of God teaches. You might say something like this: "That's a good question. If you have a few minutes I can summarize it for you. I believe the Bible teaches . . ." The words "I believe" (Latin = *credo*) come quite spontaneously to your lips. I am not suggesting that you simply quote the Apostles' Creed to the inquirer, though that is, of course, one acceptable way of summarizing the biblical faith, but my point is that composing creeds is inescapable. Everyone has a creed because everyone has a way of summarizing and expressing what one believes.

The Bible itself demands that we make personal, public confession of our faith (Matt. 10:32-33; 16:13-17; John 6:66-69; Rom. 10:9-10; 1 Tim. 6:13). Genuine faith always seeks public expression in confession and proclamation (Acts 19:18; 2 Cor. 4:13). Genuine faith that is truly a matter of the heart can never remain a secret of the heart. Our Lord said, "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). The heart must speak and make public its deepest commitments. The important question is: Will your personal creed be an accurate and faithful summary of the Christian faith?

How can you insure that your personal creed is an accurate reflection of the objective truth taught in the Bible? Keep that question in mind as we turn to the venerable Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert L. Dabney (d. 1898) for wisdom. He makes a very telling point when he reminds us that the Bible commands pastors not just to *read* the Bible, but to *explain* what it means in their own words. Consider Dabney's comments on 2 Timothy 4:2 as he marshals a telling argument for the legitimacy of creeds:

"He, as an apostle of Christ, not only permits, but commands, each uninspired pastor to give his human and uninspired expositions of what he believes to be divine truth, that is to say, his creed. If such human creeds when composed by a single teacher and delivered orally, extempore, are proper means of instruction for the church, by the stronger reason must those creeds be proper and scriptural which are the careful, mature, and joint productions of learned and godly pastors, delivered with all the accuracy of written documents. He who would consistently banish creeds must silence all preaching and reduce the teaching of the church to the recital of the exact words of Holy Scripture without note or comment."

Every time a pastor mounts the pulpit to preach, he is explaining to the congregation what he believes the Scriptures teach. He makes statements like, "I believe (*credo*) that this passage means. . ." or "We can summarize this portion of Scripture by . . ." Should the congregation reject his extra-biblical explanations and summaries with the slogan "no creed but Christ, no confession but the Bible"? No, of course not. We know the difference between the secondary authority of the pastor's words of explanation (his *credo*) and the primary authority of the Word of God. Similarly, but even more powerfully, the historic creeds provide us with not just one pastor's *credo* of what the Bible teaches, but the *credo* of the ancient, Medieval, and Reformation church! How much more authority than a single pastor's sermon does the Apostles' Creed have as a summary of the apostolic faith!

A Brief and Untechnical Statement of the Reformed Faith

by Benjamin B. Warfield

1. I believe that my one aim in life and death should be to glorify God and enjoy him forever; and that God teaches me how to glorify him in his holy Word, that is, the Bible, which he had given by the infallible inspiration of this Holy Spirit in order that I may certainly know what I am to believe concerning him and what duty he requires of me.
2. I believe that God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and incomparable in all that he is; one God but three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, my Creator, my Redeemer, and my Sanctifier; in whose power and wisdom, righteousness, goodness and truth I may safely put my trust.
3. I believe that the heavens and the earth, and all that in them is, are the work of God's hands; and that all that he has made he directs and governs in all their actions; so that they fulfill the end for which they were created, and I who trust in him shall not be put to shame but may rest securely in the protection of his almighty love.
4. I believe that God created man after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness and holiness, and entered into a covenant of life with him upon the sole condition of the obedience that was his due: so that it was by willfully sinning against God that man fell into the sin and misery in which I have been born.
5. I believe, that, being fallen in Adam, my first father, I am by nature a child of wrath, under the condemnation of God and corrupted in body and soul, prone to evil and liable to eternal death; from which dreadful state I cannot be delivered save through the unmerited grace of God my Savior.
6. I believe that God has not left the world to perish in its sin, but out of the great love wherewith he has loved it, has from all eternity graciously chosen unto himself a multitude which no man can number, to deliver them out of their sin and misery, and of them to build up again in the world his kingdom of righteousness: in which kingdom I may be assured I have my part, if I hold fast to Christ the Lord.
7. I believe that God has redeemed his people unto himself through Jesus Christ our Lord; who, though he was and ever continues to be the eternal Son of God, yet was born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them that are under the law: I believe that he bore the penalty due to my sins in his own body on the tree, and fulfilled in his own person the obedience I owe to the righteousness of God, and now presents me to his Father as his purchased possession, to the praise of the glory of his grace forever: wherefore renouncing all merit of my own, I put all my trust only in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ my redeemer.
8. I believe that Jesus Christ my redeemer, who died for my offenses was raised again for my justification, and ascended into the heavens, where he sits at the right hand of the Father Almighty, continually making intercession for his people, and governing the whole world as head over all things for his Church: so that I need fear no evil and may surely know that nothing can snatch me out of his hands and nothing can separate me from his love.

9. I believe that the redemption wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ is effectually applied to all his people by the Holy Spirit, who works faith in me and thereby unites me to Christ, renews me in the whole man after the image of God, and enables me more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness; until, this gracious work having been completed in me, I shall be received into glory: in which great hope abiding, I must ever strive to perfect holiness in the fear of God.
10. I believe that God requires of me, under the gospel, first of all, that, out of a true sense of my sin and misery and apprehension of his mercy in Christ, I should turn with grief and hatred away from sin and receive and rest upon Jesus Christ alone for salvation; that, so being united to him, I may receive pardon for my sins and be accepted as righteous in God's sight only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to me and received by faith alone; and thus and thus only do I believe I may be received into the number and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.
11. I believe that, having been pardoned and accepted for Christ's sake, it is further required of me that I walk in the Spirit whom he has purchased for me, and by whom love is shed abroad in my heart; fulfilling the obedience I owe to Christ my King; faithfully performing all the duties laid upon me by the holy law of God my heavenly Father; and ever reflecting in my life and conduct, the perfect example that has been set me by Christ Jesus my Leader, who has died for me and granted to me his Holy Spirit just that I may do the good works which God has afore prepared that I should walk in them.
12. I believe that God has established his Church in the world and endowed it with the ministry of the Word and the holy ordinances of Baptism, the Lord's Supper and Prayer; in order that through these as means, the riches of his grace in the gospel may be made known to the world, and, by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them, the benefits of redemption may be communicated to his people: wherefore also it is required of me that I attend on these means of grace with diligence, preparation, and prayer, so that through them I may be instructed and strengthened in faith, and in holiness of life and in love; and that I use my best endeavors to carry this gospel and convey these means of grace to the whole world.
13. I believe that as Jesus Christ has once come in grace, so also is he to come a second time in glory, to judge the world in righteousness and assign to each his eternal award: and I believe that if I die in Christ, my soul shall be at death made perfect in holiness and go home to the Lord; and when he shall return to his majesty I shall be raised in glory and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoyment of God to all eternity: encouraged by which blessed hope it is required of me willingly to take my part in suffering hardship here as a good soldier of Christ Jesus, being assured that if I die with him I shall also live with him, if I endure, I shall also reign with him.

And to Him, my Redeemer,
with the Father,
and the Holy Spirit,
Three Persons, one God,
be glory forever,
world without end,
Amen, and Amen.

Dr. Benjamin B. Warfield [1851-1921] taught Reformed theology for many years at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey and authored numerous theological books and articles.

What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism, Otherwise Known as the “Doctrines of Grace”

[Written by the Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN]

Preface

We love God. He is our great Treasure, and nothing can compare with him. One of the great old catechisms says, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." That is the One we love. We love the whole panorama of his perfections. To know him and to be loved by him is the end of our soul's quest for eternal satisfaction. He is infinite; and that answers to our longing for completeness. He is eternal; and that answers to our longing for permanence. He is unchangeable; and that answers to our longing for stability and security. There is none like God. Nothing can compare with him. Money, sex, power, popularity, conquest - nothing can compare with God.

The more you know him, the more you want to know him. The more you feast on his fellowship, the hungrier you are for deeper, richer communion. Satisfaction at the deepest levels breeds a holy longing for the time when we will have the very power of God to love God. That's the way Jesus prays for us to his Father, ". . . that the love with which You loved Me may be in them." That is what we long for: the very love the Father has for the Son filling us, enabling us to love the Son with the very love of the Father. Then the frustrations of inadequate love will be over.

Yes, the more you know him and love him and trust him, the more you long to know him. That is why we have written this booklet. We long to know God and enjoy God. Another great old catechism says, "What is the chief end of man?" And answers: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and *enjoy* him for ever." We believe that enjoying God is the way to glorify God, because *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*. But to enjoy him we must know him. Seeing is savoring. If he remains a blurry, vague fog, we may be intrigued for a season. But we will not be stunned with joy, as when the fog clears and you find yourself on the brink of some vast precipice.

Our experience is that clear knowledge of God from the Bible is the kindling that sustains the fires of affection for God. And probably the most crucial kind of knowledge is the knowledge of what God is like in salvation. That is what the five points of Calvinism are about. We do not begin as Calvinists and defend a system. We begin as Bible-believing Christians who want to put the Bible above all systems of thought. But over the years – many years of struggle – we have deepened in our conviction that Calvinistic teachings on the five points are Biblical and therefore true.

Our own struggle makes us patient with others who are on the way. We believe that all the wrestling to understand what the Bible teaches about God is worth it. God is a rock of strength in a world of quicksand. To know him in his sovereignty is to become like an oak tree in the wind of adversity and confusion. And along with strength is sweetness and tenderness beyond imagination. The sovereign Lion of Judah is the sweet Lamb of God.

We hope you will be helped. Please don't feel that you have to read the booklet in any particular order. Many of you will want to skip the Historical Introduction because it is not as immediately relevant to the Biblical questions. There is an intentional order to the booklet. But feel free to start wherever it looks most urgent for you. If you get help, then you will be drawn back to the rest of it. If you don't, well, then just return to the Bible and read it with all your might. That is where we want you to end up anyway: reading and understanding and loving and enjoying and obeying God's Word, not our word.

Historical Introduction

John Calvin, the famous theologian and pastor of Geneva, died in 1564. Along with Martin Luther in Germany, he was the most influential force of the Protestant Reformation. His Commentaries and Institutes of the Christian Religion are still exerting tremendous influence on the Christian Church worldwide.

The churches which have inherited the teachings of Calvin are usually called Reformed as opposed to the Lutheran or Episcopalian branches of the Reformation. While not all Baptist churches hold to a reformed theology, there is a significant Baptist tradition which grew out of and still cherishes the central doctrines inherited from the reformed branch of the Reformation.

The controversy between Arminianism and Calvinism arose in Holland in the early 1600's. The founder of the Arminian party was Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). He studied under the strict Calvinist Theodore Beza at Geneva and became a professor of theology at the University of Leyden in 1603.

Gradually Arminius came to reject certain Calvinist teachings. The controversy spread all over Holland, where the Reformed Church was the overwhelming majority. The Arminians drew up their creed in Five Articles (written by Uytenbogaert), and laid them before the state authorities of Holland in 1610 under the name Remonstrance, signed by forty-six ministers. (These Five Articles can be read in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, pp. 545-547.)

The Calvinists responded with a Counter-Remonstrance. But the official Calvinistic response came from the Synod of Dort which was held to consider the Five Articles from November 13, 1618 to May 9, 1619. There were eighty-four members and eighteen secular commissioners. The Synod wrote what has come to be known as the Canons of Dort. These are still part of the church confession of the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church. They state the Five Points of Calvinism in response to the Five Articles of the Arminian Remonstrants. (See Schaff, vol. 3, pp. 581-596).

So the so-called Five Points were not chosen by the Calvinists as a summary of their teaching. They emerged as a response to the Arminians who chose these five points to oppose.

It is more important to give a positive Biblical position on the five points than to know the exact form of the original controversy. These five points are still at the heart of Biblical theology. They are not unimportant. Where we stand on these things deeply affects our view of God, man, salvation, the atonement, regeneration, assurance, worship, and missions.

Somewhere along the way the five points came to be summarized under the acronym TULIP.

T-Total depravity.

U-Unconditional election

L-Limited atonement

I-Irresistible grace

P-Perseverance of the saint

NOTE: We are not going to follow this order in our presentation. There is a good rationale for this traditional order: it starts with man in need of salvation and then gives, in the order of their occurrence, the steps God takes to save his people. He elects, then he sends Christ to atone for the sins of the elect, then he irresistibly draws his people to faith, and finally works to cause them to persevere to the end.

We have found, however, that people grasp these points more easily if we follow a presentation based on the order in which we experience them.

We experience first our depravity and need of salvation.
Then we experience the irresistible grace of God leading us toward faith.
Then we trust the sufficiency of the atoning death of Christ for our sins.
Then we discover that behind the work of God to atone for our sins and bring us to faith was the unconditional election of God.
And finally we rest in his electing grace to give us the strength and will to persevere to the end in faith.

This is the order we will follow in our presentation.

We would like to spell out what we believe the Scripture teaches on these five points. Our great desire is to honor God by understanding and believing his truth revealed in Scripture. We are open to changing any of our ideas which can be shown to contradict the truth of Scripture. We do not have any vested interest in John Calvin himself, and we find some of what he taught to be wrong. But in general we are willing to let ourselves be called Calvinists on the five points, because we find the Calvinist position to be Biblical.

We share the sentiments of Jonathan Edwards who said in the Preface to his great book on THE FREEDOM OF THE WILL, "I should not take it at all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake: though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in every thing just as he taught."

Total Depravity

When we speak of man's depravity we mean man's natural condition apart from any grace exerted by God to restrain or transform man.

There is no doubt that man could perform more evil acts toward his fellow man than he does. But if he is restrained from performing more evil acts by motives that are not owing to his glad submission to God, then even his "virtue" is evil in the sight of God.

Romans 14:23 says, "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." This is a radical indictment of all natural "virtue" that does not flow from a heart humbly relying on God's grace.

The terrible condition of man's heart will never be recognized by people who assess it only in relation to other men. Romans 14:23 makes plain that depravity is our condition in relation to God primarily, and only secondarily in relation to man. Unless we start here we will never grasp the totality of our natural depravity.

Man's depravity is total in at least four senses.

Our rebellion against God is total. Apart from the grace of God there is no delight in the holiness of God, and there is no glad submission to the sovereign authority of God.

Of course totally depraved men can be very religious and very philanthropic. They can pray and give alms and fast, as Jesus said (Matthew 6:1-18). But their very religion is rebellion against the rights of their Creator, if it does not come from a childlike heart of trust in the free grace of God. Religion is one of the chief ways that man conceals his unwillingness to forsake self-reliance and bank all his hopes on the unmerited mercy of God (Luke 18:9-14; Colossians 2:20-23).

The totality of our rebellion is seen in Romans 3:9-10 and 18. "I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: None is righteous, no not one; no one seeks for God....There is no fear of God before their eyes."

It is a myth that man in his natural state is genuinely seeking God. Men do seek God. But they do not seek him for who he is. They seek him in a pinch as one who might preserve them from death or enhance their worldly enjoyments. Apart from conversion, no one comes to the light of God.

Some do come to the light. But listen to what John 3:20-21 says about them. "Every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God."

Yes there are those who come to the light -- namely those whose deeds are the work of God. "Wrought in God" means worked by God. Apart from this gracious work of God all men hate the light of God and will not come to him lest their evil be exposed -- this is total rebellion. "No one seeks for God...There is no fear of God before their eyes!"

(2) In his total rebellion everything man does is sin.

In Romans 14:23 Paul says, "Whatever is not from faith is sin." Therefore, if all men are in total rebellion, everything they do is the product of rebellion and cannot be an honor to God, but only part of their sinful rebellion. If a king teaches his subjects how to fight well and then those subjects rebel against their king and use the very skill he taught them to resist him, then even those skills become evil.

Thus man does many things which he can only do because he is created in the image of God and which in the service of God could be praised. But in the service of man's self-justifying rebellion, these very things are sinful.

In Romans 7:18 Paul says, "I know that no good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh." This is a radical confession of the truth that in our rebellion nothing we think or feel is good. It is all part of our rebellion. The fact that Paul qualifies his depravity with the words, "that is, in my flesh," shows that he is willing to affirm the good of anything that the Spirit of God produces in him (Romans 15:18). "Flesh" refers to man in his natural state apart from the work of God's Spirit. So what Paul is saying in Romans 7:18 is that apart from the work of God's Spirit all we think and feel and do is not good.

NOTE: We recognize that the word "good" has a broad range of meanings. We will have to use it in a restricted sense to refer to many actions of fallen people which in relation are in fact not good.

For example we will have to say that it is good that most unbelievers do not kill and that some unbelievers perform acts of benevolence. What we mean when we call such actions good is that they more or less conform to the external pattern of life that God has commanded in Scripture.

However, such outward conformity to the revealed will of God is not righteousness in relation to God. It is not done out of reliance on him or for his glory. He is not trusted for the resources, though he gives them all. Nor is his honor exalted, even though that's his will in all things (1 Corinthians 10:31). Therefore even these "good" acts are part of our rebellion and are not "good" in the sense that really counts in the end -- in relation to God.

(3) Man's inability to submit to God and do good is total.

Picking up on the term "flesh" above (man apart from the grace of God) we find Paul declaring it to be totally enslaved to rebellion. Romans 8:7-8 says, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

The "mind of the flesh" is the mind of man apart from the indwelling Spirit of God ("You are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you," Romans 8:9). So natural man has a mindset that does not and cannot submit to God. Man cannot reform himself.

Ephesians 2:1 says that we Christians were all once "dead in trespasses and sins." The point of deadness is that we were incapable of any life with God. Our hearts were like a stone toward God (Ephesians 4:18; Ezekiel 36:26). Our hearts were blind and incapable of seeing the glory of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4-6). We were totally unable to reform ourselves.

(4) Our rebellion is totally deserving of eternal punishment.

Ephesians 2:3 goes on to say that in our deadness we were "children of wrath." That is, we were under God's wrath

because of the corruption of our hearts that made us as good as dead before God.

The reality of hell is God's clear indictment of the infiniteness of our guilt. If our corruption were not deserving of an eternal punishment God would be unjust to threaten us with a punishment so severe as eternal torment. But the Scriptures teach that God is just in condemning unbelievers to eternal hell (2 Thessalonians 1:6-9; Matthew 5:29f; 10:28; 13:49f; 18:8f; 25:46; Revelation 14:9-11; 20:10). Therefore, to the extent that hell is a total sentence of condemnation, to that extent must we think of ourselves as totally blameworthy apart from the saving grace of God.

In summary, total depravity means that our rebellion against God is total, everything we do in this rebellion is sin, our inability to submit to God or reform ourselves is total, and we are therefore totally deserving of eternal punishment.

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of admitting our condition to be this bad. If we think of ourselves as basically good or even less than totally at odds with God, our grasp of the work of God in redemption will be defective. But if we humble ourselves under this terrible truth of our total depravity, we will be in a position to see and appreciate the glory and wonder of the work of God discussed in the next four points.

Irresistible Grace

The doctrine of irresistible grace does not mean that every influence of the Holy Spirit cannot be resisted. It means that the Holy Spirit can overcome all resistance and make his influence irresistible.

In Acts 7:51 Stephen says to the Jewish leaders, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit as your fathers did." And Paul speaks of grieving and quenching the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). God gives many entreaties and promptings which are resisted. In fact the whole history of Israel in the Old Testament is one protracted story of resistance, as the parable of the wicked tenants shows (Matthew 21:33-43; cf. Romans 10:21).

The doctrine of irresistible grace means that God is sovereign and can overcome all resistance when he wills. "He does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand!" (Daniel 4:35). "Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases" (Psalm 115:3). When God undertakes to fulfill his sovereign purpose, no one can successfully resist him.

This is what Paul taught in Romans 9:14-18, which caused his opponent to say, "Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" To which Paul answers: "Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me thus?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?" (Romans 9:20f).

More specifically irresistible grace refers to the sovereign work of God to overcome the rebellion of our heart and bring us to faith in Christ so that we can be saved. If our doctrine of total depravity is true, there can be no salvation without the reality of irresistible grace. If we are dead in our sins, totally unable to submit to God, then we will never believe in Christ unless God overcomes our rebellion.

Someone may say, "Yes, the Holy Spirit must draw us to God, but we can use our freedom to resist or accept that drawing." Our answer is: except for the continual exertion of saving grace, we will always use our freedom to resist God. That is what it means to be "unable to submit to God." If a person becomes humble enough to submit to God it is because God has given that person a new, humble nature. If a person remains too hard hearted and proud to submit to God, it is because that person has not been given such a willing spirit. But to see this most persuasively we should look at the Scriptures.

In John 6:44 Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." This drawing is the sovereign work of grace without which no one can be saved from their rebellion against God. Again some say, "He draws all men, not just some." But this simply evades the clear implication of the context that the Father's "drawing" is why some believe and not others.

Specifically, John 6:64-65 says, "'But there are some of you that do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who

those were that did not believe, and who it was that should betray him. And he said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."

Notice two things.

First, notice that coming to Jesus is called a gift. It is not just an opportunity. Coming to Jesus is "given" to some and not to others.

Second, notice that the reason Jesus says this, is to explain why "there are some who do not believe." We could paraphrase it like this: Jesus knew from the beginning that Judas would not believe on him in spite of all the teaching and invitations he received. And because he knew this, he explains it with the words, No one comes to me unless it is given to him by my Father. Judas was not given to Jesus. There were many influences on his life for good. But the decisive, irresistible gift of grace was not given.

2 Timothy 2:24-25 says, "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth."

Here, as in John 6:65 repentance is called a gift of God. Notice, he is not saying merely that salvation is a gift of God. He is saying that the prerequisites of salvation are also a gift. When a person hears a preacher call for repentance he can resist that call. But if God gives him repentance he cannot resist because the gift is the removal of resistance. Not being willing to repent is the same as resisting the Holy Spirit. So if God gives repentance it is the same as taking away the resistance. This is why we call this work of God "irresistible grace".

NOTE: It should be obvious from this that irresistible grace never implies that God forces us to believe against our will. That would even be a contradiction in terms. On the contrary, irresistible grace is compatible with preaching and witnessing that tries to persuade people to do what is reasonable and what will accord with their best interests.

1 Corinthians 1:23-24 says, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jew and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Notice the two kinds of "calls" implied in this text.

First, the preaching of Paul goes out to all, both Jews and Greeks. This is the general call of the gospel. It offers salvation to all who will believe on the crucified Christ. But by and large it falls on unreceptive ears and is called foolishness.

But then, secondly, Paul refers to another kind of call. He says that among those who hear there are some who are "called" in such a way that they no longer regard the cross as foolishness but as the wisdom and power of God. What else can this call be but the irresistible call of God out of darkness into the light of God? If ALL who are called in this sense regard the cross as the power of God, then something in the call must effect the faith. This is irresistible grace.

It is further explained in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, "The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God...It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

Since men are blinded to the worth of Christ, a miracle is needed in order for them to come to see and believe. Paul compares this miracle with the first day of creation when God said, "Let there be light." It is in fact a new creation, or a new birth. This is what is meant by the effectual call in 1 Corinthians 1:24.

Those who are called have their eyes opened by the sovereign creative power of God so that they no longer see the cross as foolishness but as the power and the wisdom of God. The effectual call is the miracle of having our blindness removed. This is irresistible grace.

Another example of it is in Acts 16:14, where Lydia is listening to the preaching of Paul. Luke says, "The Lord

opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul." Unless God opens our hearts, we will not heed the message of the gospel. This heart-opening is what we mean by irresistible grace.

Another way to describe it is "new birth" or being born again. We believe that new birth is a miraculous creation of God that enables a formerly "dead" person to receive Christ and so be saved. We do not think that faith precedes and causes new birth. Faith is the evidence that God has begotten us anew. "Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God" (1 John 5:1).

When John says that God gives the right to become the children of God to all who receive Christ (John 1:12), he goes on to say that those who do receive Christ "were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." In other words, it is necessary to receive Christ in order to become a child of God, but the birth that brings one into the family of God is not possible by the will of man.

Man is dead in trespasses and sins. He cannot make himself new, or create new life in himself. He must be born of God. Then, with the new nature of God, he immediately receives Christ. The two acts (regeneration and faith) are so closely connected that in experience we cannot distinguish them. God begets us anew and the first glimmer of life in the new-born child is faith. Thus new birth is the effect of irresistible grace, because it is an act of sovereign creation -- "not of the will of man but of God."

Limited Atonement

The atonement is the work of God in Christ on the cross whereby he cancelled the debt of our sin, appeased his holy wrath against us, and won for us all the benefits of salvation. The death of Christ was necessary because God would not show a just regard for his glory if he swept sins under the rug with no recompense.

Romans 3:25-26 says that God "put Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood...This was to demonstrate God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

In other words the death of Christ was necessary to vindicate the righteousness of God in justifying the ungodly by faith. It would be unrighteous to forgive sinners as though their sin were insignificant, when in fact it is an infinite insult against the value of God's glory. Therefore Jesus bears the curse, which was due to our sin, so that we can be justified and the righteousness of God can be vindicated.

The term "limited atonement" addresses the question, "For whom did Christ die?" But behind the question of the extent of the atonement lies the equally important question about the nature of the atonement. What did Christ actually achieve on the cross for those for whom he died?

If you say that he died for every human being in the same way, then you have to define the nature of the atonement very differently than you would if you believed that Christ only died for those who actually believe. In the first case you would believe that the death of Christ did not actually save anybody; it only made all men savable. It did not actually remove God's punitive wrath from anyone, but instead created a place where people could come and find mercy -- IF they could accomplish their own new birth and bring themselves to faith without the irresistible grace of God.

For if Christ died for all men in the same way then he did not purchase regenerating grace for those who are saved. They must regenerate themselves and bring themselves to faith. Then and only then do they become partakers of the benefits of the cross.

In other words if you believe that Christ died for all men in the same way, then the benefits of the cross cannot include the mercy by which we are brought to faith, because then all men would be brought to faith, but they aren't. But if the mercy by which we are brought to faith (irresistible grace) is not part of what Christ purchased on the cross, then we are left to save ourselves from the bondage of sin, the hardness of heart, the blindness of corruption, and the wrath of God.

Therefore it becomes evident that it is not the Calvinist who limits the atonement. It is the Arminian, because he

denies that the atoning death of Christ accomplishes what we most desperately need -- namely, salvation from the condition of deadness and hardness and blindness under the wrath of God. The Arminian limits the nature and value and effectiveness of the atonement so that he can say that it was accomplished even for those who die in unbelief and are condemned. In order to say that Christ died for all men in the same way, the Arminian must limit the atonement to a powerless opportunity for men to save themselves from their terrible plight of depravity.

On the other hand we do not limit the power and effectiveness of the atonement. We simply say that in the cross God had in view the actual redemption of his children. And we affirm that when Christ died for these, he did not just create the opportunity for them to save themselves, but really purchased for them all that was necessary to get them saved, including the grace of regeneration and the gift of faith.

We do not deny that all men are the intended beneficiaries of the cross in some sense. 1 Timothy 4:10 says that Christ is "the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe." What we deny is that all men are intended as the beneficiaries of the death of Christ in the same way. All of God's mercy toward unbelievers -- from the rising sun (Matthew 5:45) to the worldwide preaching of the gospel (John 3:16) -- is made possible because of the cross.

This is the implication of Romans 3:25 where the cross is presented as the basis of God's righteousness in passing over sins. Every breath that an unbeliever takes is an act of God's mercy withholding judgment (Romans 2:4). Every time the gospel is preached to unbelievers it is the mercy of God that gives this opportunity for salvation.

Whence does this mercy flow to sinners? How is God just to withhold judgment from sinners who deserve to be immediately cast into hell? The answer is that Christ's death so clearly demonstrates God's just abhorrence of sin that he is free to treat the world with mercy without compromising his righteousness. In this sense Christ is the savior of all men.

But he is especially the Savior of those who believe. He did not die for all men in the same sense. The intention of the death of Christ for the children of God was that it purchase far more than the rising sun and the opportunity to be saved. The death of Christ actually saves from ALL evil those for whom Christ died "especially."

There are many Scriptures which say that the death of Christ was designed for the salvation of God's people, not for every individual. For example:

John 10:15, "I lay down my life for the sheep." The sheep of Christ are those whom the Father draws to the Son. "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." Notice: being a sheep enables you to become a believer, not vice versa. So the sheep for whom Christ dies are the ones chosen by the Father to give to the Son.

In John 17:6,9,19 Jesus prays, "I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me...I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine...And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth." The consecration in view here is the death of Jesus which he is about to undergo. His death and his intercession is uniquely for his disciples, not for the world in general.

John 11:51-52, "[Caiaphas] being high priest that year prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." There are children of God scattered throughout the world. These are the sheep. These are the ones the Father will draw to the Son. Jesus died to gather these people into one. The point is the same as John 10:15-16, "I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice." Christ died for his sheep, that is, for the children of God.

Revelation 5:9, "Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." In accordance with John 10:16 John does not say that the death of Christ ransomed all men but that it ransomed men from all the tribes of the world.

This is the way we understand texts like 1 John 2:2 which says, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." This does not mean that Christ died with the intention to appease the wrath of God for every person in the world, but that the "sheep," "the children of God" scattered throughout the

whole world, "from every tongue and tribe and people and nation" are intended by the propitiation of Christ. In fact the grammatical parallel between John 11:51-52 and 1 John 2:2 is so close it is difficult to escape the conviction that the same thing is intended by John in both verses.

John 11:51-52, "He prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad."

1 John 2:2, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."

The "whole world" refers to the children of God scattered throughout the whole world.

If "the whole world" referred to every individual in the world, we would be forced to say that John is teaching that all people will be saved, which he does not believe (Revelation 14:9-11). The reason we would be forced to say this is that the term propitiation refers to a real removal of wrath from sinners. When God's wrath against a sinner is propitiated, it is removed from that sinner. And the result is that all God's power now flows in the service of his mercy, with the result that nothing can stop him from saving that sinner.

Propitiated sins cannot be punished. Otherwise propitiation loses its meaning. Therefore if Christ is the propitiation for all the sins of every individual in the world, they cannot be punished, and must be saved. But John does not believe in such universalism (John 5:29). Therefore it is very unlikely that 1 John 2:2 teaches that Jesus is the propitiation of every person in the world.

Mark 10:45, in accord with Revelation 5:9, does not say that Jesus came to ransom all men. It says, "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Similarly in Matthew 26:28 Jesus says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Hebrews 9:28, "So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." (See also 13:20; Isaiah 53:11-12.)

One of the clearest passages on the intention of the death of Christ is Ephesians 5:25-27. Here Paul not only says that the intended beneficiary of the death of Christ is the Church, but also that the intended effect of the death of Christ is the sanctification and glorification of the church. This is the truth we want very much to preserve: that the cross was not intended to give all men the opportunity to save themselves, but was intended to actually save the church.

Paul says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor."

Similarly in Titus 2:14 Paul describes the purpose of Christ's death like this: "He gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds." If Paul were an Arminian would he not have said, "He gave himself to redeem all men from iniquity and purify all men for himself"? But Paul says that the design of the atonement is to purify for Christ a people out from the world. This is just what John said in John 10:15; 11:51f; and Revelation 5:9.

One of the most crucial texts on this issue is Romans 8:32. It is one of the most precious promises for God's people in all the Bible. Paul says, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"

The crucial thing to see here is how Paul bases the certainty of our inheritance on the death of Christ. He says, "God will most certainly give you all things because he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for you." What becomes of this precious argument if Christ is given for those who do not in fact receive all things but instead are lost? The argument vanishes.

If God gave his own Son for unbelievers who in the end are lost, then he cannot say that the giving of the Son

guarantees "all things" for the those for whom he died. But this is what he does say! If God gave his Son for you, then he most certainly will give you all things. The structure of Paul's thought here is simply destroyed by introducing the idea that Christ died for all men in the same way.

We can conclude this section with the following summary argument. Which of these statements is true?

1. Christ died for some of the sins of all men.
2. Christ died for all the sins of some men.
3. Christ died for all the sins of all men.

No one says that the first is true, for then all would be lost because of the sins that Christ did not die for. The only way to be saved from sin is for Christ to cover it with his blood.

The third statement is what the Arminians would say. Christ died for all the sins of all men. But then why are not all saved? They answer, Because some do not believe. But is this unbelief not one of the sins for which Christ died? If they say yes, then why is it not covered by the blood of Jesus and all unbelievers saved? If they say no (unbelief is not a sin that Christ has died for) then they must say that men can be saved without having all their sins atoned for by Jesus, or they must join us in affirming statement number two: Christ died for all the sins of some men. That is, he died for the unbelief of the elect so that God's punitive wrath is appeased toward them and his grace is free to draw them irresistibly out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Unconditional Election

If all of us are so depraved that we cannot come to God without being born again by the irresistible grace of God, and if this particular grace is purchased by Christ on the cross, then it is clear that the salvation of any of us is owing to God's election.

Election refers to God's choosing whom to save. It is unconditional in that there is no condition man must meet before God chooses to save him. Man is dead in trespasses and sins. So there is no condition he can meet before God chooses to save him from his deadness.

We are not saying that final salvation is unconditional. It is not. We must meet the condition of faith in Christ in order to inherit eternal life. But faith is not a condition for election. Just the reverse. Election is a condition for faith. It is because God chose us before the foundation of the world that he purchases our redemption at the cross and quickens us with irresistible grace and brings us to faith.

Acts 13:48 reports how the Gentiles responded to the preaching of the gospel in Antioch of Pisidia. "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Notice, it does not say that as many believed were chosen to be ordained to eternal life. The prior election of God is the reason some believed while others did not.

Similarly Jesus says to the Jews in John 10:26, "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." He does not say, "You are not my sheep because you do not believe." Being a sheep is something God decides for us before we believe. It is the basis and enablement of our belief. We believe because we are God's chosen sheep, not vice versa. (See John 8:47; 18:37.)

In Romans 9 Paul stresses the unconditionality of election. For example, in verses 11-12 he describes the principle God used in the choice of Jacob over Esau: "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, [Rebecca] was told, 'The elder will serve the younger.'" God's election is preserved in its unconditionality because it is transacted before we are born or have done any good or evil.

NOTE: Some interpreters say that Romans 9 has nothing to do with the election of individuals to their eternal destinies. They say that the chapter only relates to the historical roles that are played by the peoples descended from

Jacob and Esau.

We recommend *The Justification of God* by John Piper (Baker Book House, 1983) which was written to investigate this very issue. It concludes that Romans 9 not only relates to the historical roles of whole peoples, but also to the eternal destinies of individuals, because among other reasons (*Justification*, pp. 38-54), verses 1-5 pose a problem about the lostness of individual Israelites which would be totally unaddressed if the chapter had nothing to say about individuals.

The unconditionality of God's electing grace is stressed again in Romans 9:15-16, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy."

We really do not understand mercy if we think that we can initiate it by our own will or effort. We are hopelessly bound in the darkness of sin. If we are going to be saved, God will have to unconditionally take the initiative in our heart and irresistibly make us willing to submit to him. (See Romans 11:7.)

Ephesians 1:3-6 is another powerful statement of the unconditionality of our election and predestination to sonship. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He predestined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace."

Some interpreters argue that this election before the foundation of the world was only an election of Christ, but not an election of which individuals would actually be in Christ. This simply amounts to saying that there is no unconditional election of individuals to salvation. Christ is put forward as the chosen one of God and the salvation of individuals is dependent on their own initiative to overcome their depravity and be united to Christ by faith. God does not choose them and therefore God cannot effectually convert them. He can only wait to see who will quicken themselves from the dead and choose him.

This interpretation does not square well with verse 11 where it says that "we were predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will."

Nor does the literal wording of verse 4 fit this interpretation. The ordinary meaning of the word for "choose" in verse 4 is to select or pick out of a group (cf. Luke 6:13; 14:7; John 13:18; 15:16,19). So the natural meaning of the verse is that God chooses his people from all humanity, before the foundation of the world by viewing them in relationship to Christ their redeemer.

All election is in relation to Christ. There would be no election of sinners unto salvation if Christ were not appointed to die for their sins. So in that sense they are elect in Christ. But it is they, and not just Christ who are chosen out of the world.

Also the wording of verse 5 suggests the election of people to be in Christ, and not just the election of Christ. Literally it says, "Having predestined us unto sonship through Jesus Christ." We are the ones predestined, not Christ. He is the one that makes the election of sinners possible, and so our election is "through him," but there is no talk here about God having a view only to Christ in election.

Perhaps the most important text of all in relation to the teaching of unconditional election is Romans 8:28-33.

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose, For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies."

Often this text is used to argue against unconditional election on the basis of verse 29 which says, "Those whom he

foreknew he also predestined..." So some say that people are not chosen unconditionally. They are chosen on the basis of their faith which they produce without the help of irresistible grace and which God sees beforehand.

But this will not square with the context. Notice that Romans 8:30 says, "And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." Focus for a moment on the fact that all whom God calls he also justifies.

This calling in verse 30 is not given to all people. The reason we know it's not is that all those who are called are also justified -- but all men are not justified. So this calling in verse 30 is not the general call to repentance that preachers give or that God gives through the glory of nature. Everybody receives that call. The call of verse 30 is given only to those whom God predestined to be conformed to the image of his son (v.29). And it is a call that leads necessarily to justification: "Those whom he called he also justified."

But we know that justification is by faith (Romans 5:1). What then is this call that is given to all those who are predestined and which leads to justification? It must be the call of irresistible grace. It is the call of 1 Corinthians 1:24 which we discussed above on page 6.

Between the act of predestination and justification there is the act of calling. Since justification is only by faith the calling in view must be the act of God whereby he calls faith into being. And since it necessarily results in justification it must be irresistible. There are none called (in this sense! not the sense of Matthew 22:14) who are not justified. All the called are justified. So the calling of verse 30 is the sovereign work of God which brings a person to faith by which he is justified.

Now notice the implication this has for the meaning of foreknowledge in verse 29. When Paul says in verse 29, "Those whom he foreknew he also predestined," he can't mean (as so many try to make him mean) that God knows in advance who will use their free will to come to faith, so that he can predestine them to sonship because they made that free choice on their own. It can't mean that because we have seen from verse 30 that people do not come to faith on their own. They are called irresistibly.

God does not foreknow the free decisions of people to believe in him because there aren't any such free decisions to know. If anyone comes to faith in Jesus, it is because they were quickened from the dead (Ephesians 2:5) by the creative Spirit of God. That is, they are effectually called from darkness into light.

So the foreknowledge of Romans 8:29 is not the mere awareness of something that will happen in the future apart from God's predetermination. Rather it is the kind of knowledge referred to in Old Testament texts like Genesis 18:19 ("I have chosen [literally:known] Abraham so that he may charge his children...to keep the way of the Lord"), and Jeremiah 1:5 ("Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations") and Amos 3:2 ("You only [Israel] have I known from all the families of the earth").

As C.E.B. Cranfield says, the foreknowledge of Romans 8:29 is "that special taking knowledge of a person which is God's electing grace." Such foreknowledge is virtually the same as election: "Those whom he foreknew (i.e. chose) he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son."

Therefore what this magnificent text (Romans 8:28-33) teaches is that God really accomplishes the complete redemption of his people from start to finish. He foreknows, i.e. elects a people for himself before the foundation of the world, he predestines this people to be conformed to the image of his Son, he calls them to himself in faith, he justifies them through that faith, and he finally glorifies them -- and nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ for ever and ever (Romans 8:39). To him be all praise and glory! Amen.

Perseverance of the Saints

It follows from what was just said that the people of God WILL persevere to the end and not be lost. The foreknown are predestined, the predestined are called, the called are justified, and the justified are glorified. No one is lost from this group. To belong to this people is to be eternally secure.

But we mean more than this by the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We mean that the saints will and must persevere in the obedience which comes from faith. Election is unconditional, but glorification is not. There are many warnings in Scripture that those who do not hold fast to Christ can be lost in the end.

The following seven theses summarize our understanding of this crucial doctrine.

1. Our faith must endure to the end if we are to be saved.

This means that the ministry of the word is God's instrument in the preservation of faith as well as the begetting of faith. We do not breathe easy after a person has prayed to receive Christ, as though we can be assured from our perspective that they are now beyond the reach of the evil one. There is a fight of faith to be fought. We must endure to the end in faith if we are to be saved.

1 Corinthians 15:1,2, "Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast--unless you believed in vain."

Colossians 1:21-23, "And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel..."

2 Timothy 2:11,12, "The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him..."

Mark 13:13, "But he who endures to the end will be saved."

See also Revelation 2:7,10,11,17,25,26; 3:5,11,12,21.

2. Obedience, evidencing inner renewal from God, is necessary for final salvation.

This is not to say that God demands perfection. It is clear from Philippians 3:12,13 and 1 John 1:8-10 and Matthew 6:12 that the New Testament does not hold out the demand that we be sinlessly perfect in order to be saved. But the New Testament does demand that we be morally changed and walk in newness of life.

Hebrews 12:14, "Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

Romans 8:13, "If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Galatians 5:19-21, "Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not enter the kingdom of God." (See also Ephesians 5:5 and 1 Corinthians 6:10.)

1 John 2:3-6, "And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He who says, 'I know him' but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." (See also 1 John 3:4-10, 14; 4:20.)

John 8:31, "Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.'" (See also Luke 10:28; Matthew 6:14,15; 18:35; Genesis 18:19; 22:16-17; 26:4-5; 2 Timothy 2:19.)

3. God's elect cannot be lost.

This is why we believe in eternal security--namely, the eternal security of the elect. the implication is that God will so work that those whom he has chosen for eternal salvation will be enabled by him to persevere in faith to the end and fulfill, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the requirements for obedience.

Romans 8:28-30, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." What is evident from this passage is that those who are effectually called into the hope of salvation will indeed persevere to the end and be glorified.

John 10:26-30, "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (See also Ephesians 1:4-5.)

4. There is a falling away of some believers, but if it persists, it shows that their faith was not genuine and they were not born of God.

1 John 2:19, "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 it might be made plain that they all are not of us." Similarly, the parable of the four soils as interpreted in Luke 8:9-14 pictures people who "hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root, they believe for a while and in a time of temptation fall away."

The fact that such a thing is possible is precisely why the ministry of the Word in every local church must contain many admonitions to the church members to persevere in faith and not be entangled in those things which could possibly strangle them and result in their condemnation.

5. God justifies us on the first genuine act of saving faith, but in doing so he has a view to all subsequent acts of faith contained, as it were, like a seed in that first act.

What we are trying to do here is own up to the teaching of Romans 5:1, for example, that teaches that we are already justified before God. God does not wait to the end of our lives in order to declare us righteous. In fact, we would not be able to have the assurance and freedom in order to live out the radical demands of Christ unless we could be confident that because of our faith we already stand righteous before him.

Nevertheless, we must also own up to the fact that our final salvation is made contingent upon the subsequent obedience which comes from faith. The way these two truths fit together is that we are justified on the basis of our first act of faith because God sees in it (like he can see the tree in an acorn) the embryo of a life of faith. This is why those who do not lead a life of faith with its inevitable obedience simply bear witness to the fact that their first act of faith was not genuine.

The textual support for this is that Romans 4:3 cites Genesis 15:6 as the point where Abraham was justified by God. This is a reference to an act of faith early in Abraham's career. Romans 4:19-22, however, refers to an experience of Abraham many years later (when he was 100 years old, see Genesis 21:5,12) and says that because of the faith of this experience Abraham was reckoned righteous. In other words, it seems that the faith which justified Abraham is not merely his first act of faith but the faith which gave rise to acts of obedience later in his life. (The same thing could be shown from James 2:21-24 in its reference to a still later act in Abraham's life, namely, the offering of his son, Isaac, in Genesis 22.) The way we put together these crucial threads of Biblical truth is by saying that we are indeed justified on the basis of our first act of faith but not without reference to all the subsequent acts of faith which give rise to the obedience that God demands.

6. God works to cause his elect to persevere.

We are not left to ourselves and our assurance is very largely rooted in the sovereign love of God to perform that which he has called us to do. 1 Peter 1:5, "By God's power we are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Jude 24,25, "Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."

Philippians 1:6, "And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

1 Corinthians 1:8-9, "Jesus Christ will sustain you to the end; guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

7. Therefore we should be zealous to make our calling and election sure.

2 Peter 1:10, "Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

Concluding Testimonies

It is possible to believe all these things in your head and go to hell. So easily deceived and hypocritical are we by nature! Therefore our concern in writing these things is not merely to convince the mind but also to win the heart.

We want for others the sweet experience of resting in the massive comfort of these truths. We want others to feel the tremendous incentive for righteousness and for missions flowing from these truths. We want for others the experience of knowing and trusting the sovereign grace of God in such a way that He and He alone gets the glory.

To this end we have gathered here some testimonies of what these truths have meant to some great Christians of the past. For those who have known them truly, they have never been mere speculation for the head, but have always been power for the heart and life.

Augustine -- Augustine was resoundingly converted by the irresistible grace of God after leading a dissolute life. He wrote in his *CONFESSIONS* (X, 40):

I have no hope at all but in thy great mercy. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt. Thou dost enjoin on us continence...Truly by continence are we bound together and brought back into that unity from which we were dissipated into a plurality. For he loves thee too little who loves anything together with thee, which he loves not for thy sake. O love that ever burnest and art never quenched! O Charity, my God, enkindle me! Thou commandest continence. Grant what thou commandest and command what thou wilt.

These are the words of a man who loves the truth of irresistible grace, because he knows he is utterly undone without it. But also in his doctrinal letters he drives this beloved truth home (Epistle ccxvii, to Vitalis):

If, as I prefer to think in your case, you agree with us in supposing that we are doing our duty in praying to God, as our custom is, for them that refuse to believe, that they may be willing to believe and for those who resist and oppose his law and doctrine, that they may believe and follow it. If you agree with us in thinking that we are doing our duty in giving thanks to God, as is our custom, for such people when they have been converted...then you are surely bound to admit that the wills of men are preeminently moved by the grace of God, and that it is God who makes them to will the good which they refused; for it is God whom we ask so to do, and we know that it is meet and right to give thanks to him for so doing...

For Augustine the truth of irresistible grace was the foundation of his prayers for the conversion of the lost and of his thanks to God when they were converted.

Jonathan Edwards -- Jonathan Edwards, the great New England preacher and theologian of the eighteenth century, had an equally deep love for these truths. He wrote when he was 26 about the day he fell in love with the sovereignty of God:

There has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, in respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, from that day to this...God's absolute sovereignty...is what my mind seems to rest assured of, as much as of any thing that I see with my eyes...The doctrine has very often appeared exceeding pleasant, bright, and sweet. Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God...God's sovereignty has ever appeared to me, a great part of his glory. It has often been my delight to approach God, and adore him as a sovereign God. (Personal Narrative).

George Whitefield -- Edwards wept openly when George Whitefield preached in his church, because of how much he loved the message he preached. Whitefield was a great evangelist in the 18th century. He said, "I embrace the Calvinistic scheme, not because Calvin, but Jesus Christ has taught it to me" (Arnold Dalimore, GEORGE WHITEFIELD 1, p. 406).

He pleaded with John Wesley not to oppose the doctrines of Calvinism:

I cannot bear the thoughts of opposing you: but how can I avoid it, if you go about (as you brother Charles once said) to drive John Calvin out of Bristol. Alas, I never read anything that Calvin wrote; my doctrines I had from Christ and His apostles; I was taught them of God (Dalimore, p. 574).

It was these beliefs that filled him with holy zeal for evangelism:

The doctrines of our election, and free justification in Christ Jesus are daily more and more pressed upon my heart. They fill my soul with a holy fire and afford me great confidence in God my Saviour.

I hope we shall catch fire from each other, and that there will be a holy emulation amongst us, who shall most debase man and exalt the Lord Jesus. Nothing but the doctrines of the Reformation can do this. All others leave freewill in man and make him, in part at least, a saviour to himself. My soul, come not thou near the secret of those who teach such things...I know Christ is all in all. Man is nothing; he hath a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and to do his good pleasure.

Oh, the excellency of the doctrine of election and of the saints' final perseverance! I am persuaded, til a man comes to believe and feel these important truths, he cannot come out of himself, but when convinced of these and assured of their application to his own heart, he then walks by faith indeed! (Dalimore, p. 407).

George Mueller -- George Mueller is famous for the orphanages he founded and the amazing faith he had to pray for God's provision. Not many people know the theology that undergirded that great ministry. In his mid-twenties (1829) he had an experience which he records later as follows:

Before this period [when I came to prize the Bible alone as my standard of judgment] I had been much opposed to the doctrines of election, particular redemption (i.e. limited atonement), and final persevering grace. But now I was brought to examine these precious truths by the Word of God. Being made willing to have no glory of my own in the conversion of sinners, but to consider myself merely an instrument; and being made willing to receive what the Scriptures said, I went to the Word, reading the New Testament from the beginning, with a particular reference to these truths.

To my great astonishment I found that the passages which speak decidedly for election and persevering grace, were about four times as many as those which speak apparently against these truths; and even those few, shortly after, when I had examined and understood them, served to confirm me in the above doctrines.

As to the effect which my belief in these doctrines had on me, I am constrained to state for God's glory, that though I am still exceedingly weak, and by no means so dead to the lusts of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, as I might be, and as I ought to be, yet, by the grace of God, I have walked more closely with Him since that period. My life has not been so variable, and I may say that I have lived much more for God than before (Autobiography, pp. 33-34).

Charles Spurgeon -- C.H. Spurgeon was a contemporary of George Mueller. He was the pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London for thirty years, the most famous pastor of his day -- and a Baptist at that. His preaching was powerful to the winning of souls to Christ. But what was his gospel that held thousands spellbound each week and

brought many to the Saviour?

I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what is nowadays called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel...unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the Cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called (AUTOBIOGRAPHY 1, p. 168).

He had not always believed these things. Spurgeon recounts his discovery of these truths at the age of 16:

Born, as all of us are by nature, an Arminian, I still believed the old things I had heard continually from the pulpit, and did not see the grace of God. When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me...I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths in my own soul -- when they were, as John Bunyan says, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron...

One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, "How did you come to be a Christian?" I sought the Lord. "But how did you come to seek the Lord?" The truth flashed across my mind in a moment -- I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, How came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures? I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, "I ascribe my change wholly to God" (AUTOBIOGRAPHY, pp. 164-5).

Spurgeon started a college for pastors and was intent that the key to being a worthy teacher in the church was to grasp these doctrines of grace.

Arminianism is thus guilty of confusing doctrines and of acting as an obstruction to a clear and lucid grasp of the Scripture; because it mis-states or ignores the eternal purpose of God, it dislocates the meaning of the whole plan of redemption. Indeed confusion is inevitable apart from this foundational truth [of election].

Without it there is a lack of unity of thought, and generally speaking they have no idea whatever of a system of divinity. It is almost impossible to make a man a theologian unless you begin with this [doctrine of election]. You may if you please put a young believer to college for years, but unless you shew him this ground-plan of the everlasting covenant, he will make little progress, because his studies do not cohere, he does not see how one truth fits with another, and how all truths must harmonize together...

Take any county throughout England, you will find poor men hedging and ditching that have a better knowledge of divinity than one half of those who come from our academies and colleges, for the reason simply and entirely that these men have first learned in their youth the system of which election is a centre, and have afterwards found their own experience exactly square with it.

A Final Appeal

It is fitting that we close this account of our belief in the doctrines of grace by appealing to you, the reader, to receive the magnificent Christ who is the eternal Author of these doctrines. Give heed to the beautiful entreaty extended by J.I. Packer, a great contemporary advocate of these truths:

To the question: what must I do to be saved? the old gospel [Calvinism] replies: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. To the further question: what does it mean to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? its reply is: it means knowing oneself to be a sinner, and Christ to have died for sinners; abandoning all self-righteousness and self-confidence, and casting oneself wholly upon Him for pardon and peace; and exchanging one's natural enmity and rebellion against God for a

spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of one's heart by the Holy Ghost.

And to the further question still: how am I to go about believing on Christ and repenting, if I have no natural ability to do these things? it answers: look to Christ, speak to Christ, cry to Christ, just as you are; confess your sin, your impenitence, your unbelief, and cast yourself on His mercy; ask Him to give you a new heart, working in you true repentance and firm faith; ask Him to take away your evil heart of unbelief and to write His law within you, that you may never henceforth stray from Him. Turn to Him and trust Him as best you can, and pray for grace to turn and trust more thoroughly; use the means of grace expectantly, looking to Christ to draw near to you as you seek to draw near to Him; watch pray read and hear God's Word, worship and commune with God's people, and so continue till you know in yourself beyond doubt that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, and the new heart which you desired has been put within you ("Introductory Essay to John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*," p. 21).

Let Charles Spurgeon lead you in prayer:

Join with me in prayer at this moment, I entreat you. Join with me while I put words into your mouths, and speak them on your behalf -- "Lord, I am guilty, I deserve thy wrath. Lord, I cannot save myself. Lord, I would have a new heart and a right spirit, but what can I do? Lord, I can do nothing, come and work in me to will and to do thy good pleasure.

*Thou alone hast power, I know,
To save a wretch like me;
To whom, or whither should I go
If I should run from thee?*

But I now do from my very soul call upon thy name. Trembling, yet believing, I cast myself wholly upon thee, O Lord. I trust the blood and righteousness of thy dear Son...Lord, save me tonight, for Jesus' sake." (From Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973], pp. 101f.)

Ten Effects of Believing in the Five Points of Calvinism by Dr. John Piper

These ten points are my personal testimony to the effects of believing in the five points of Calvinism. I have just completed teaching a seminar on this topic and was asked by the class members to post these reflections so they could have access to them. I am happy to do so. They, of course, assume the content of the course, which is available on tape from Desiring God Ministries, but I will put them here for wider use in the hope that they might stir others to search, Berean-like, to see if the Bible teaches what I call “Calvinism.”

1. These truths make me stand in awe of God and lead me into the depth of true God-centered worship.

I recall the time I first saw, while teaching Ephesians at Bethel College in the late '70's, the threefold statement of the goal of all God's work, namely, “to the praise of the glory of his grace” (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14).

It has led me to see that we cannot enrich God and that therefore his glory shines most brightly not when we try to meet his needs but when we are satisfied in him as the essence of our deeds. “From him and through him and to him are all things. To him the glory forever” (Romans 11:36). Worship becomes an end in itself.

It has made me feel how low and inadequate are my affections, so that the Psalms of longing come alive and make worship intense.

2. These truths help protect me from trifling with divine things.

One of the curses of our culture is banality, cuteness, cleverness. Television is the main sustainer of our addiction to superficiality and triviality.

God is swept into this. Hence the trifling with divine things.

Earnestness is not excessive in our day. It might have been once. And, yes, there are imbalances in certain people today who don't seem to be able to relax and talk about the weather.

Robertson Nicole said of Spurgeon, “Evangelism of the humorous type [we might say, church growth of the marketing type] may attract multitudes, but it lays the soul in ashes and destroys the very germs of religion. Mr. Spurgeon is often thought by those who do not know his sermons to have been a humorous preacher. As a matter of fact there was no preacher whose tone was more uniformly earnest, reverent and solemn” (Quoted in *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, p. 57).

3. These truths make me marvel at my own salvation.

After laying out the great, God-wrought salvation in Ephesians 1, Paul prays, in the last part of that chapter, that the effect of that theology will be the enlightenment of our hearts so that we marvel at our hope, and at the riches of the glory of our inheritance, and at the power of God at work in us – that is, the power to raise the dead.

Every ground of boasting is removed. Brokenhearted joy and gratitude abound.

The piety of Jonathan Edwards begins to grow. When God has given us a taste of his own majesty and our own wickedness, then the Christian life becomes a thing very different than conventional piety. Edwards describes it beautifully when he says,

The desires of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires: their hope is a humble hope, and their joy, even when it is unspeakable, and full of glory, is humble, brokenhearted joy, and leaves the Christian more poor in spirit, and more like a little child, and more disposed to a universal lowliness of behavior (Religious Affections, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959, pp. 339f).

4. These truths make me alert to man-centered substitutes that pose as good news.

In my book, *The Pleasures of God* (2000), pp. 144-145, I show that in the 18th century in New England the slide from the sovereignty of God led to Arminianism and thence to universalism and thence to Unitarianism. The same thing happened in England in the 19th century after Spurgeon.

Iain Murray's *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), p. 454, documents the same thing: "Calvinistic convictions waned in North America. In the progress of the decline which Edwards had rightly anticipated, those Congregational churches of New England which had embraced Arminianism after the Great Awakening gradually moved into Unitarianism and universalism, led by Charles Chauncy."

You can also read in J. I. Packer's *Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 160, how Richard Baxter forsook these teachings and how the following generations reaped a grim harvest in the Baxter church in Kidderminster.

These doctrines are a bulwark against man-centered teachings in many forms that gradually corrupt the church and make her weak from the inside, all the while looking strong or popular.

1 Timothy 3:15, "The church of the living God [is] the pillar and bulwark of the truth."

5. These truths make me groan over the indescribable disease of our secular, God-belittling culture.

I can hardly read the newspaper or look at a TV ad or a billboard without feeling the burden that God is missing.

When God is the main reality in the universe and is treated as a non-reality, I tremble at the wrath that is being stored up. I am able to be shocked. So many Christians are sedated with the same drug as the world. But these teachings are a great antidote.

And I pray for awakening and revival.

And I try to preach to create a people that are so God-saturated that they will show and tell God everywhere and all the time.

We exist to reassert the reality of God and the supremacy of God in all of life.

6. These truths make me confident that the work which God planned and began, he will finish – both globally and personally.

This is the point of Romans 8:28-39.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. 29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? 33 Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

7. These truths make me see everything in the light of God's sovereign purposes – that from him and through him and to him are all things, to him be glory forever and ever.

All of life relates to God. There's no compartment where he is not all-important and the one who gives meaning to everything. 1 Corinthians 10:31.

Seeing God's sovereign purpose worked out in Scripture, and hearing Paul say that "he accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11) makes me see the world this way.

8. These truths make me hopeful that God has the will, the right, and the power to answer prayer that people be changed.

The warrant for prayer is that God may break in and change things – including the human heart. He can turn the will around. "Hallowed be thy name" means: cause people to hallow your name. "May your word run and be glorified" means: cause hearts to be opened to the gospel.

We should take the New Covenant promises and plead with God to bring them to pass in our children and in our neighbors and among all the mission fields of the world.

"God, take out of their flesh the heart of stone and give him a new heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19).

"Lord, circumcise their hearts so that they love you" (Deuteronomy 30:6).

"Father, put your spirit within them and cause them to walk in Your statutes" (Ezekiel 36:27).

"Lord, grant them repentance and the knowledge of the truth that they may escape from the snare of the devil" (2 Timothy 2:25-26).

"Father, open their hearts so that they believe the gospel" (Acts 16:14).

9. These truths reminds me that evangelism is absolutely essential for people to come to Christ and be saved, and that there is great hope for success in leading people to faith, but that conversion is not finally dependent on me or limited by the hardness of the unbeliever.

So it gives hope to evangelism, especially in the hard places and among the hard peoples.

John 10:16, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold, I must bring them also. They will heed my voice."

It is God's work. Throw yourself into it with abandon.

10. These truths make me sure that God will triumph in the end.

Isaiah 46:9-10, “I am God in there is no other. I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, “My counsel shall stand that I will accomplish all my purpose””

Putting them altogether: God gets the glory and we get the joy.

Church Membership and Our Reformed Confessions

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21:

Q #54. What do you believe concerning the “holy catholic church”?

A. I believe that the Son of God, through His Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, 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. And of this community I am and always will be a living member.

Q #55. What do you understand by “the communion of saints”?

A. First, that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all His treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it his duty to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.

Belgic Confession, Article 27: The Holy Catholic Church

We believe and confess
one single catholic or universal church--
a holy congregation and gathering
of true Christian believers,
awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ
being washed by his blood,
and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

This church has existed from the beginning of the world
and will last until the end,
as appears from the fact
that Christ is eternal King
who cannot be without subjects.

And this holy church is preserved by God
against the rage of the whole world,
even though for a time
it may appear very small
in the eyes of men--
as though it were snuffed out.

For example,
during the very dangerous time of Ahab
the Lord preserved for himself seven thousand men
who did not bend their knees to Baal.

And so this holy church
is not confined,

bound,
or limited to a certain place or certain persons.
But it is spread and dispersed
throughout the entire world,
 though still joined and united
 in heart and will,
 in one and the same Spirit,
 by the power of faith.

Belgic Confession, Article 28: The Obligations of Church Members

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.

But all people are obliged
to join and unite with it,
keeping the unity of the church
 by submitting to its instruction and discipline,
 by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ,
 and by serving to build up one another,
according to the gifts God has given them
as members of each other
in the same body.

And to preserve this unity more effectively,
it is the duty of all believers,
 according to God's Word,
to separate themselves
from those who do not belong to the church,
 in order to join this assembly
 wherever God has established it,
 even if civil authorities and royal decrees forbid
 and death and physical punishment result.

And so,
all who withdraw from the church
or do not join it
act contrary to God's ordinance.