

CHRIST'S CHURCH AND OUR CALLING

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*It is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the Church and to join this assembly (of God's true Church) wherever He has established it. They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow.
(Belgic Confession, Art. 28)*

That is no small thing! It is important to ensure that one is at the correct church address. It is so important, according to the confession, that you will even have to risk death because of it. And this is not just idle talk, since at the time these words were written it often came to that. Every Lord's Day morning you and your family had to make a choice; either go to the Roman Catholic church and listen to a sermon from a priest, or go to the Reformed church—and in those days the Reformed church was strictly off limits. You could be dragged off to prison just for having Reformed literature in your house.

We may pose a number of questions here: Why was the choice of church so important? As long as you served God uprightly in your own heart and you didn't pay any attention to all those unbiblical superstitions, couldn't you, for the sake of the preservation of your life and that of your family, go to the Roman Catholic church? Maybe the priest himself was someone who only wanted to follow the Bible and didn't care very much about what the pope thought—what would be wrong with that?

In the confession the issue is not the belief of the individual person in the congregation or in the church. The issue is also not what a particular minister or priest might happen to think. Rather, the issue is about the church being church. The confession holds that there are some churches which must be called "false." Now that word "false" sounds very strong. In this context it actually means nothing other than "illegitimate," that is, a church which Christ no longer recognises as a legitimate gathering of His sheep.

We may ask if it is possible that Christ sometimes refuses to recognise churches as legitimate gatherings. Many people from the Hervormde Church (the large state church in the Netherlands) don't think so. They say: The church always remains a church of Christ. She is our mother—even if she becomes seriously ill (through false teaching). You cannot abandon a sick mother!

And yet those same 'Hervormde' people have surely *abandoned* the Roman Catholic church? Astonishingly enough, many don't think so! Some years ago I spoke with a minister (from the 'Hervormde' church) who was holidaying in Katwijk. He explained that many, including himself, had learned at Sunday school and Catechism classes that the Reformed people had been forced out of the Roman Catholic church. They were taught that you must never leave a church of your own free will. He did admit that this was a somewhat coloured view of history.

What should we say to this? Luther was indeed thrown out of the Roman Catholic church. But that is not what happened to the Reformed people. Just as our Confession states, it is the duty of every believer to *leave* an unlawful church and to join himself to a lawful (= true) church.

Personal Faith

But let us return to the original question. Is the address of the church truly as important as our confession makes out? Isn't it sufficient to have an upright personal faith and to belong to a reasonable local congregation? Take, for example, the local Anglican church of Rockingham. Unlike most of the very liberal Anglican churches in the Perth area, Rockingham Anglicans are Bible believing and are served by a minister who stands up for the biblical Gospel and a Reformed interpretation of the 39 articles (the official Anglican confession). Praise God! Is it wrong to be a member of that church?

A personal faith that comes from an upright heart is truly essential. Each one of us must personally learn to depend on Jesus Christ. We must learn to praise and thank Him for the forgiveness of our sins. Christ has paid the ultimate penalty for each one of us. Christ, not we ourselves, was crucified for our sins. And it is the wonder of grace that we learn that He has given us that personal faith and regularly feeds it with His Word and Spirit. There is here a sudden change of focus from "us" to "God."

When we have received that living faith in our hearts, we have a personal relationship with God. It cannot be otherwise. For then Christ lives in our hearts through His Spirit. The Holy Spirit has become part of the very fabric of our lives. That's why the Bible warns us as believers: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." (Eph. 4:30). The Spirit places God's mark on us. On the last day we may show that mark and exclaim, "Look! I am a person for whom Christ has paid!"

But if we have such a personal relationship with God through faith, then the objection may be raised that we won't lose that relationship just by going to another—what one might call "false" or unlawful—church. That is true, but that is not the issue here. It is true that we could pray to God in such an unlawful church and we could praise and thank Him there. But the point at issue is something quite different.

We must ask ourselves the question whether we are sitting in a gathering that Christ *recognises* as His church. You can go and sit anywhere and praise God. And Christ, if you have true faith, will continue to acknowledge you as one of His sheep. But we need to ask ourselves the question whether He acknowledges the gathering we are in as His church. That is what is at issue. That Christ recognises us as one of His sheep, is not the same thing as saying that He recognises the flock (that is, the church) we are in as a legitimate gathering of His sheep.

We might ask ourselves whether this question is so important. Well isn't true faith underlined by the desire to obey and follow Jesus Christ in everything? If He asks us to honour Him in a church that He acknowledges as His own, then that's what we will want to do.

This leads us to the question as to what Christ's church is. Many people turn very quickly to the text: "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Matt. 18:20) And, indeed, Christ does say that, but He is not speaking there about His church. In that passage He is speaking to His disciples and promises them that when they follow the procedure for discipline (Matt. 18:15-20) He will be with them. The "two or three" are witnesses concerning the unforgiven sin of a straying brother.¹

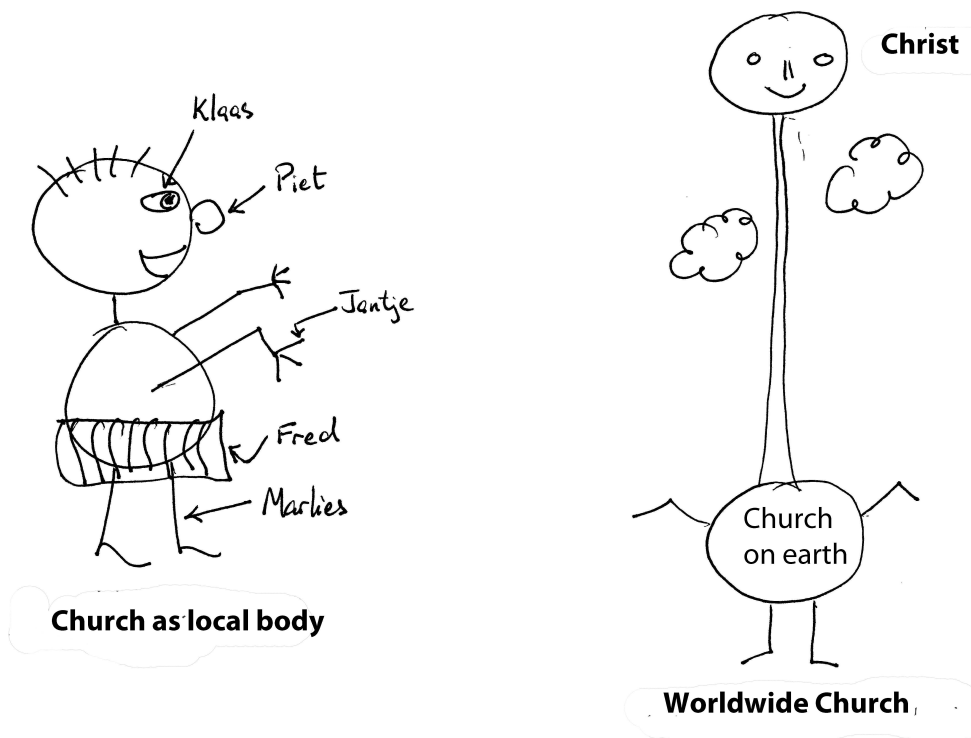
What is Christ's Church?

The confession correctly states that the church is the gathering of true believers, and a gathering that God wishes to establish in every local place (cf. Lev. 23:3 where God commands believers to gather locally to worship Him every sabbath day). In fact the Greek word for church, *ecclesia*, means just that, "assembly" or "gathering." Literally it refers to people who are "called out" (of their homes) in order to gather together. In the Bible this word never refers to a church *building*. The essence of the church is its gathering together for worship, although the church remains *church* even outside the worship services (cf. Acts 8:3). We see here that the word "church" in the New Testament almost always refers to the *local* congregation.

The only real exception is Ephesians 5 where Christ is said to be the head of the whole church, understood to be worldwide (in Acts 9:31 there is very strong textual evidence for reading the plural "churches"). Note the emphasis on a plurality of local churches in texts such as Gal. 1:2; Acts 15:41 and 16:5. This emphasis is also seen in Paul's use of the image of the "body of Christ" in the first letter to the Corinthians where individual members are parts of that body (1 Cor. 6:15-19; 10:16-17 and 12:12ff, cf. Rom. 12:4-8). The "body" is quite clearly the local congregation of Corinth. See the accompanying sketch (next page).

Just before His ascension into heaven the Lord Jesus gave His great missionary mandate to His disciples. They were charged to go into the whole world with the gospel. After Pentecost this mandate was to be put into practice. That was the beginning of the New Testament era of the church. We read about the institution of these new churches of Christ in every town and city in the book of Acts. We see the apostles travelling, preaching, and instituting churches.

¹ See further my essay *The Sinews of the Church: Biblical Principles concerning Church Discipline* to be found at:
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>



Churches were instituted by establishing a gathering of believers over which elders were placed who, in the name of Christ, shepherded this congregation (= gathering). The elders bear the final responsibility for such a local congregation or church (Hebr. 13:17). It is of such a local church that we all are members. Each local church is a complete church of the Lord Jesus Christ, His body (cf. I Cor. 10: 17; 12: 12ff. and especially v. 27).

How Does Christ Indicate Recognition of His Churches?

If we are members of Christ's church, then we have also received responsibilities from Him. As a member of His church we are obligated to use our gifts for the upbuilding of this congregation, we must help ensure that Christ receives His rightful honour and that sin isn't tolerated among His flock.

Christ rules over His local churches. When these churches as congregations fall into hardened and unrepentant sin, Christ requires us to secede for He no longer recognises such bodies as His churches. This fact is shown quite vividly by several New Testament examples.

In the first place we should consider the example of Acts 18:5-8. Here we read of how Paul came to Corinth and, as was his custom, began preaching the gospel of Christ in the local synagogue. Only when they rejected Jesus as the true Messiah did he (and those who followed his preaching) leave and establish a new church. This reminds us of the fact that in every new town or city of the world Paul came to, he always considered the local synagogue to be the true church of God. The synagogues outside of Israel (unlike those in Judea) had not yet been confronted with the preaching of Christ and therefore could not be held accountable for not yet having accepted Him in faith. Only after having been confronted with the preaching of Christ, and having rejected Him, did Paul consider a secession to be necessary. The new local church of God (the Father of Jesus Christ) was established next door in the house of Titius Justus. The leader of the synagogue joined this secession church. From now on there would be two churches in Corinth claiming to be the true churches of God, namely the local Jewish synagogue which rejected the idea that Jesus was God's Son, and the Pauline church which accepted Jesus Christ.

In the second place we might consider Paul's letter to the Galatians. When Paul wrote his letter to the churches in the region of Galatia he was very upset. Churches which he had founded through his preaching had subsequently gone over to a Judaistically modified form of the gospel. After Paul had left the region, other Judaistic preachers had come with their "corrections" to Paul's gospel and the Galatian churches had

followed these new preachers.² The apostle Paul calls those that accept and live by this new teaching “accursed.” The Galatians have been “bewitched” for if they accept this new doctrine—despite the fact that the Judaisers appear still to have believed in Christ and His crucifixion for sins—Christ benefits them nothing and they are “severed” from Him (see Gal. 1:6-10; 2:21—3:2; 5:2-5).

Now we should try and put ourselves in the shoes of a member of one of these congregations. We know from church history that many of them did not heed the call of Paul to repent.³ A church member who desired to be faithful to the apostle Paul would be faced with the fact that the doctrine his church preached led men to be severed from Christ and accursed! He would have little choice but to secede and begin a congregation which faithfully followed the teachings of the true apostles. And, once again, we know from church history that this is precisely what happened. A typical town in the region of Galatia therefore ended up with three different churches, each claiming to be true churches of God, namely, the local synagogue of Jews and proselytes who refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, a Judaistic Christian church, and a church faithful to the teaching of the apostle Paul.

The work of the devil attempting to destroy Christ’s church was evident right from the beginning, and the New Testament shows us how important it is to take a stand for the truth, even if that means secession upon secession.⁴

The third example, or rather set of examples, comes from the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. In Revelation 1:9-20 John saw a vision of the glorified Jesus walking in the midst of seven golden lampstands, the seven churches of Asia Minor. In chapters two and three Christ writes letters to the seven congregations.⁵ Some of the congregations are comforted, some are warned. Of importance to our topic are the warnings. We may take, for example, the congregation in Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7). She had lost her first love (v.4) and the Lord calls her to repentance. He then says, “If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” (v.5).

² For an overview of the teaching of these Judaisers see my essay *Pharisees, Judaisers and Paul* to be found at:
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

The Judaisers themselves probably originated with those Jewish Christians who refused to accept the decrees of the council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15. It appears that they seceded from the church of the apostles and began establishing their own churches and attempting to convert those of Paul. These are probably the same people Paul calls “false apostles” in 2 Cor. 11:13.

³ See the last section of my essay *Pharisees, Judaisers and Paul*.

⁴ Of course it also needs to be said that secession should *never* be undertaken unless one can in good conscience say that the church from which one secedes can no longer be considered to be a church recognised by Christ. Secession for any other reason is the sin of schism. Paul warns the Corinthians against forming various groups with different flavours in 1 Corinthians 1 – 4.

⁵ It may be objected that John is not instructed to write to the congregations, but to the “angels” of the congregations. The letters (in Greek) are addressed for the most part in the first person. That these “angels” cannot be considered to be divine messengers is clear from the fact that John is asked to write these letters down and send them (1:11). Moreover it becomes clear upon reading the letters that the individual “angels” which are addressed really stand for the congregations themselves. The following considerations from several of the letters should suffice.

We should first note that each letter closes with the sentence: “He who has an ear, let him hear (= obey) what the Spirit says to the *churches*.” It is clear from this alone that the churches themselves are addressed.

In the letter to Ephesus we note that the “messenger” (= angel) is asked to repent. If he does not repent, then the lampstand (that is, the church) will be removed from its place. If the messenger as an individual is not the same as the congregation, then why is the congregation punished because of the sin of the messenger? Surely the more obvious punishment would be to remove the messenger from his place?

In the letter to Smyrna it is also quite clear that the individual messenger is addressed *in respect of the whole congregation*. In v.10 the letter all of a sudden addresses the reader in the *plural*, saying that some of them will be cast into prison. It then switches immediately back into the singular with the charge to be faithful unto death! Is only the individual messenger to be faithful unto death? Will only he receive the crown of life? The charge is surely meant to be applied to all the persecuted brethren of that church.

In the letter to Pergamum the text also suddenly slips in the plural in v.13 (“who was killed among *you*”) and in the letter to Thyatira vv.23b-25 also use a plural form of address.

In the letter to Sardis at v.4 Jesus says to the messenger that he (the messenger) does have a few names in Sardis (of men) who have not defiled their clothes. This implies that the rebukes made against the messenger earlier in the letter actually apply to the whole congregation, otherwise it would not be surprising that there are still a few who are undefiled.

In summary, the “messenger” should be seen not as a messenger to the churches, but a messenger or ambassador *from* the church who receives in the name of the church the letter which is sent from Jesus Christ.

We have already seen that the lampstand was defined in chapter one as the church itself (Rev. 1:12-13, 20). Jesus threatens them therefore with the removal of that status. They face the prospect of no longer being recognised by Jesus as His church. If they do not repent, they may well continue to gather together to conduct worship services and may well still *consider* themselves to be a church of Jesus Christ, but Christ will say, “I have removed my lampstand! I no longer walk in your midst!”

Christ gives a similar warning to the church at Laodicea. He reproves them for being neither hot nor cold. They have no zeal for the gospel. And thus we read the warning: “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.” In effect this amounts to the same threat. Christ will no longer acknowledge this church as His congregation.

In the same way as for the churches in Galatia, congregational members who desired to remain faithful to Christ would need to actively work at changing the course of their erring church. But if the hearts of the majority of the congregation harden against Christ’s word, they need to separate themselves to avoid coming under Christ’s judgement. The church that would be left behind would, most likely, continue to call itself a church of Christ. Likely there would still be true sheep of Christ left behind, sheep who have not yet seen that Jesus no longer acknowledges that congregation as His church. That would be a sad thing, and one would certainly need to do his best to convince those believers that Jesus wants to be served in a church which He recognises, a church which remains true to His Word.

It is, of course, not always easy to determine that a church is no longer acknowledged by Christ. Jesus does not give direct revelation about this. We do not receive a vision concerning this, or get a message from an angel. We are left to determine the matter for ourselves on the basis of what Christ has revealed about His church and His gospel in His Word. But if we notice that a church refuses to repent we may not hold out until a new generation appears. The warnings for the churches of Ephesus and Laodicea were given to the congregations *as they were at that time*. Jesus warns *them* that if they do not repent He will spit them out of His mouth and remove His lampstand from them. Even in the first century the choice which church to belong to was not easy, but surely important!

Our Choice of Church

When we look at many unfaithful churches around us then two things quickly become apparent. Firstly, there are still many sheep of Jesus Christ to be found there—people who are true believers and who desire to serve God with their whole life. But secondly, many churches have organisationally become so tolerant that for years complete denial of the gospel has been tolerated. The Anglican churches in the Perth area are sad evidence of this. There are indeed still many ministers who preach the true gospel. But the denial of the resurrection, of Christ’s crucifixion for our sins are often tolerated in these churches. They do not tolerate the use of church discipline against such ministers because “doctrinal freedom” must be maintained. Even reasonably conservative congregations are not free from the consequences of this organisational denial of Scripture.

This article is not the place to expand upon the problems within other churches. But one point should be clear. If we pay close attention to what Jesus says about His churches in the New Testament then we cannot and may not acknowledge unfaithful churches as true churches of Christ. The warnings of Christ in His Word have gone unheeded for years and for generations. There is no other possibility but that Christ has acted on His warnings.

Our Responsibilities

How does all of this concern us? In the first place we are all responsible before Christ concerning the choice of church we make. If He has forgiven our sins by His crucifixion then He asks us to worship Him in a church that He acknowledges. But He asks more from us. We are also all responsible to use all our gifts for the building up of that church which He acknowledges. This means that we may not lean back in our lazy chair and leave all of the concerns of the congregation to others, but that we honestly ask ourselves how we can be of benefit in building and sustaining Christ’s church in this place. Last, but certainly not least, is our responsibility toward those sheep who remain in a church that Christ no longer acknowledges. With great care, wisdom and love we must exercise our calling to convince such people to consider their church situation and to call them to become members of a church that Christ does recognise. We may not keep silent about this matter. The love for Christ, as well as the love for these brothers and sisters must stimulate each of

us to activity in this matter. If we have friends, acquaintances or even family, in unfaithful churches then they need to be approached in the love of Christ. If we remain silent about their choice of church in order to “keep the peace” we show ourselves instead to be loveless toward them. The love of Christ is a love that will put everything on the line in order to convince others to worship and thank Him in the manner He has asked for in His Word.

It may be that this means that we must study some more about the doctrine of the church and more recent church history. Then we ought not to neglect to do so. Surely the minister and elders are willing to give guidance when asked. Let us pray that our local churches become known, not as exclusive clubs with people who don’t pay any attention to others, but as congregations that are actively busy with the Word of God, and always willing and ready to speak about it in the love of Christ—all this in order to see to it that our Lord is honoured and worshipped. Let it be said of us—that’s where the work of God’s Spirit can be seen, that’s where people can be found who put the Word of God above all else. Only God can work that in us through His Word and Spirit. Let us direct our efforts towards Him.