



Living members

When people are admitted to the Lord's Table through profession of faith, they are asked to make several promises. Among the promises is a statement that the new member will commit his or her whole life to the Lord's service as a *living member of His Church*. The same terminology is found in Lord's Day 21 of the Catechism in which young people learn to confess that they are and ever shall be *living members* of the church (Answer 54).

If we seek to define a living member, we enter into the territory of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God makes that which is dead alive. He regenerates by the Gospel of Christ. Uniting God's people to Christ, the Spirit imparts life and light to dead sinners living in darkness. Living members of the Church, then, are those who are living members of Christ by the Spirit.

However, when we use the term "living member," we are usually speaking about the visible *results* of a living relationship with Christ. A person who has such a living relationship with Christ through the Spirit to the glory of the Father, will give evidence of that relationship in a transformed walk of life. People who are in Christ by a true faith will have a lively and abiding interest in the life of the local church. They will look for and seize opportunities to be useful for the edification of the local congregation. Such people will walk close to God in prayer and in meditation on His promises. Pursuing holiness and so a clear conscience will be central priorities. The cause of mission and outreach will be very important to them.

It seems clear that the use of the term "living membership" implies the possible existence of another class of people in the congregations. Alongside the living branches which are planted in Christ and thus bearing fruit, there may also be "dead wood." Such branches are not rooted and planted in Christ and so bear no fruit. Thus, it is possible that the church may confront within its own ranks the sad reality of those who are members "in name only." In other words, the church has to reckon with the threatening problem of *nominal* Christianity.

Nominal Christianity is, of course, a broad term. We shouldn't too quickly throw it out as a charge against a fellow member. We can recognize variations within this category. For example, there are those who are simply hypocrites. Then, there are those members who, while they may have a strong and quiet trust in Christ, simply don't get involved. Reasons for this marginalization vary: the bitter aftermath of a conflict in the church, a timid disposition, ill health, depression, being "burnt-out," as well as other mitigating circumstances. Actually, such members are not nominal Christians at all; they are rather people who need to be encouraged and loved and motivated to express their faith in word and deed.

In general, though, by "nominal Christians," we mean those who want to be regarded as church members and as Christians, but who fail to maintain an ongoing relationship with the Lord and His Church. The nominal Christian may be a member by baptism; he may even have made a profession of faith. A nominal Christian may be familiar with the language of orthodoxy, but he is a stranger to the inward realities of which that language speaks. Thus, the nominal Christian shows an inward apathy to the riches of Christ. Spiritual vitality is absent. As a consequence, radical Kingdom living is missing and there is very little or no involvement in the life of the local congregation.

Causes of nominality

A recent book on our topic describes in considerable detail a number of perceived causes of nominality.¹ While we cannot accept all the prescriptions for health offered by this author, we

certainly can learn much from his perceptive analysis of different factors contributing to the problem of nominal Christianity.

In the chapter entitled, "Characteristics and Causes of Nominality," the author deals with the question why a person's relationship with Christ and the church becomes damaged or distant. He lists and discusses the following factors:²

- They may be left unaware of Christ's claims upon their lives. They have never rightly understood the need for a personal response to the message of the Gospel.
- They have resisted Christ's claims upon their lives, opposing any emphasis on personal faith and obedience.
- They are overly dependent on the spiritual vitality of other Christians.
- They may have become atrophied through non-involvement and non-use of gifts.
- Their obedience has been selective.
- They are "residual" or "cultural" Christians who are living on the spiritual capital accumulated through previous generations.

However, the author of this book also describes the *role of the church* in the problem of nominal membership. According to the author, the church must be prepared to recognize the fact that it may be as much a part of the problem as the solution.

Here are some of the ways in which the church is perceived by the author as possibly contributing to the problem:³

- The congregation has never had the Gospel clearly presented in the power of the Holy Spirit. Problems seen by the author in preaching include: presenting moral homilies instead of the radical Gospel of repentance and the offer of new life in Christ and preaching that has been so "stylized and punctuated with religious jargon as to be unintelligible or irrelevant to large sections of the audience."
- The authority of the Bible has been undermined through rationalism and empiricism. Through the influence of rationalism, "*dogma is now dubious and doubt dogmatic. Ambiguity covers everything like a Scottish mist...*" (quoting from O. Guinness).
- The Word of God has been proclaimed in a cold, abrasive and judgmental manner. The author states that "*righteous indignation must always be tempered by a heartfelt longing for the impenitent to change their ways and a preparedness on the part of the pastor to go to any lengths to reach out effectively to the recalcitrant.*"⁴
- Unresolved personal conflicts.
- Too frequent change of ministers.
- Lack of effective procedures for integrating newcomers.

Dealing with the problem

As Reformed churches we can certainly recognize the accuracy of Gibb's diagnosis. In our own midst we must be vigilant in the struggle to serve the Lord faithfully. Lack of commitment to Christ and so also to Christ's Church is an ever-present danger. The danger of a mere secondhand religion inherited from grandfather and grandmother is familiar to us from the Old Testament. How often, for example, don't the prophets fulminate against ceremonial religion which is not accompanied by sincere love for God from the heart!⁵ In clear language, we are told that such duplicitous worship is an abomination to God. What can we do to help prevent a lapse into nominal Christianity? In the first place, we must not abuse the doctrine of the covenant. Most of our members are "born into the church." As infants, we have received the wonderful assurance of God's gift of righteousness in Christ. The sign and seal of baptism testifies to God's faithfulness. However, we must never permit being "born into the church" to relativize the need to be "born again." Baptism is a mark of privilege, but it is also a mandate to live in faith and obedience. To quote the *Form for Baptism*, "*we are, through baptism, called and obliged by the Lord to a new*

obedience. We are to cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to trust Him, and to love Him with our whole heart.”

Sometimes, Baptists and Mennonites and the like have said strong words against infant baptism on the grounds that it promotes nominalism. Now, we might reject the charge by pointing out that nominalism can also be a problem for Baptists. We would do better to respond with genuine grief that nominalism does exist in Reformed churches. Infant baptism, however, is not a cause of nominalism. A wrong understanding of infant baptism may very well promote nominalism. A recent writer made the acerbic remark that Baptists do not understand the covenant because paedobaptists themselves don't understand it.⁶ An understanding of covenant membership which to the slightest degree diminishes the call to personal faith and holiness may well lead to presumption. Rightly understood, however, the covenant and infant baptism as sign and seal of covenant promises, do not diminish but rather intensify the call to faith and obedience. After all, from those to whom much has been given, much is also expected.

Secondly, the practice of infant baptism must go hand in hand with faithful church discipline. The privileged people of the covenant are expected by their Lord to bear fruit that befits repentance. When branches are conspicuously fruitless, the church must do the necessary pruning. Naturally, this will require a great deal of pastoral sensitivity and patience. Reformed churches take into account various stages of maturity and deal tenderly with those who struggle against prevailing sins, especially when they are young. Nonetheless, when sin is persistent and attitudes are hardened, the necessary pruning must take place through faithful church discipline. If this doesn't happen and sin is tolerated, nominalism is promoted and the name of God is blasphemed because of us.

In summary, a response to nominalism must keep in mind the marks of the church as confessed in Article 29 of the Belgic. The *sacrament* of baptism must be rightly administered and explained – not as a ticket to heaven, but as a mark of privilege and as a mandate for perseverance in faith and godliness. *Preaching* must be pure, that is, it must present Christ *together with* the call to repent and believe. And third, *church discipline* must reflect the necessary boldness and courage to confront sin in the covenant community – also sin amongst covenant youth who have not yet made a confession of faith.

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¹ E. Gibbs, *In Name Only. Tackling the Problem of Nominal Christianity* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994).

² *ibid*, pages 89-94.

³ *ibid*, see pages 78-89.

⁴ *ibid*, page 82.

⁵ See, for example, Psalm 50:7-23; Psalm 51: 15-17; Isaiah 1:10-17; Micah 6:6-8.

⁶ D. Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations. Covenant Mercy for the People of God* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996), pg. 94