

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

If these remarks seem uncharitable, untrue, or unnecessary to the reader, then judge accordingly—but I trust that they will be understood as brotherly and respectful. I consider that writing strongly about this is important enough to risk such judgment from those who disagree. I'm writing because in reading the latest editorial (in *BRJ* 54), I am convinced that most of the things said with regard the issue of church membership were either unhelpful or misleading. I'm writing also because these issues are not mere theory for me, but have an immense practical impact on my life, the lives of those around me, and of many saints throughout the world today, and in the past who have undergone great sufferings to join and never leave the true church wherever it is found. If we thought that these arguments were valid, then it is likely that the Limerick Reformed Fellowship (www.limerickreformed.com), of which I am a member, would not exist at all, and we along with many others have been utterly foolish in bearing a yoke and a cross that we had no need to bear. I trust that you will see that we have not been foolish in this regard once you read my refutation.

First, you quote the *Nicene Creed*, presumably because it refers to baptism immediately after its article about the church. I suppose this was intended to bear some relation to your argument in the penultimate paragraph. But is it not ironic, that you should quote this, and then after a brief introduction, an argument is made upon the hypothesis of there being no church—when such a hypothetical situation is wholly at odds with this article of our faith? As *Westminster Confession* 25:5 puts it: “there shall be always a church on earth to worship God according to his will.”

The *Apostles' Creed* (which was not quoted) affixes “the communion of the saints” to the church. We cannot practice or experience the communion of the saints as we ought to, according to the ordinance of God, apart from the church institute. This is how *Heidelberg Catechism* Lord's Day 21 clearly explains it:

Q. 54. What believest thou concerning the “holy catholic church” of Christ?

A. That the Son of God, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves to himself by His Spirit and Word, out of the whole human race, a church chosen to everlasting life, agreeing in true faith; and that I am, and for ever shall remain, a living member thereof.

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

A. First, that all and every one who believes, being members of Christ, are, in common, partakers of him and of all his riches and gifts; secondly, that every one must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members.

Second, to say then that the providence of God prevents us from joining His church in active membership, practicing this communion of the saints, is really a denial that God gathers His church from the beginning to the end of the world. Apart from membership in a faithful manifestation of the true church, how can we even begin to fulfil our high calling to give ourselves for the edification of the body of Christ according to the mighty power of the Spirit who works His gifts in us (I Cor. 12:7-31)? How do we even begin to manifest that highest Christian virtue of charity if we have not even joined ourselves to the church (I Cor. 13)? The providence of God is so far from being an excuse not to join the church, that it is actually the means God uses to gather us! It is absurd to make any decision based upon our own feeble perception of God’s providence. Ruth could have decided that, since things would be so difficult in Israel, she ought to stay in Moab. But rather, she made her decision *despite* all the difficulties that she knew there would be. She could not have known how well it would turn out. This ought to be an encouragement to those who are discouraged by all the perceived difficulties.

I acknowledge, of course, that there may be exceptions when, by the inscrutable wisdom of God, believers may be forcibly imprisoned or inescapably stranded by some means, but this is hardly the case for the current readership or any of those involved in the discussion at the BRF conference six years ago.

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Should we establish the principle by referring to the most extreme case? Such is the tactic of those who wish to avoid this commandment of God entirely. Agreeing with our faithful Reformed confessions, I am not alone in confessing that God's sovereign providence with regard to the elect in having "determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of [our] habitation" (Acts 17:26), is to gather us from far and wide into His beloved church.

We must be careful not to dare to be the ones against whom God speaks this word:

Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life. Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him (Isa. 43:4-7).

Likewise, we must distance ourselves from the Pharisees (Matt. 23:37) and Pharaoh, and all who oppose the gathering of God's people, whether by violence, guile, erroneous teaching, or any other means. The destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD is more than enough of a warning to us to exercise extreme caution when dealing with this issue! When Pharaoh opposed God's gathering of the Hebrews, the land of Egypt was utterly laid waste by the most spectacular and devastating plagues that the world has ever seen, and ever will see until the end of the world. And finally, after such devastation, whereby God displayed His immutable will and almighty power to gather His people, Pharaoh and all his hosts who continued stubbornly to resist God, were all drowned as they attempted to hold back the children of Israel.

Still today, every enemy of the church opposes this work of God—the wicked world, our flesh, and the devil. Our flesh in particular is very adept at listening to the deceptions of the devil, and hearkening to the siren call of the world. How abundantly we are furnished with enticing and pleasant reasons to set our affections on things below instead of upon Jerusalem above! We need look

no further than our own desperately wicked and deceitful hearts to find innumerable excuses and reasons not to forsake all to find the manifestation of the true church on earth at this time and cleave ourselves to it, or die in the attempt. So instead, by faith we need to hear the word of Christ instructing us: “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

Belgic Confession 28 does not speak of death theoretically, but from experience (and when we produce shameful excuses, we deal treacherously and hatefully with all the martyrs who have died to join the church):

... it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the church, and to join themselves to this congregation, where-soever God hath established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes be against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment.

We must weigh this up, whether we love our own lives more than the church of God, and our duty as members of His undivided body (I Cor. 1:10-13; 11:19; 12:20, 25), seeing that we have all received of this same Spirit of God, and God is one, and cannot be divided. As we do, we begin to look at the issue not from our viewpoint as sinful weak creatures in various difficult situations, amidst many trials and temptations, but from the viewpoint of God’s perfection and holiness. Reformed theology begins and ends with God, and Reformed practice is no different.

How is it then that some cannot move? Is there a godly will to move at least? If so, are there not many ways in which we can all aid one another to accomplish this, no matter the difficulty? Are there not many saints throughout the world more than willing to offer assistance in various ways to make it possible for an isolated Christian to move? Have the possibilities even been explored, or have we been too busy employing our minds in the development of excuses rather than employing them to find some way to overcome whatever difficulties there may be? And if it is truly the case that it is so impossible for a believer to move to where there is a faithful church, surely spending time in prayer to our Almighty Father would be far better than adding to our affliction by getting splinters at the bottom of the barrel of excuses. But again,

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have such afflicted saints thoroughly exhausted all possible means of moving and communicated their particular difficulties to other saints in the hope of aid, wisdom, and prayer? The providence of God certainly does not mean that we ought not to move from where He has placed us at the current time—for we know only His revealed will (which is to join the church), not His secret will hidden in the eternal counsel. To make decisions based upon our feeble perceptions of God’s providence, rather than according to His simple and clear commandments is absurd! It may be that He has placed us in a very difficult situation, in order to test our faith, to sanctify us in learning obedience through hardship and suffering, to share in the sufferings of Christ, knowing that in this we will also share a far more exceeding weight of glory (II Cor. 4:17; cf. Phil. 1:29).

Third, the old phrase “the church in the house” is mentioned. I recognise that Rev. Stewart commented on some misconceptions associated with this phrase. It could be added also that if a group of isolated believers live nearby to each other, then by all means they should begin to meet, wherever they can, whether that be in someone’s home or in some other building. This is how the Limerick Reformed Fellowship started (and we have now been blessed with a lawfully ordained and called pastor). But we must never see this as an end in itself. Titus was instructed by Paul to “set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). The goal of such preliminary meetings is ultimately to seek the establishment of a Reformed church according to the Word of God. And neither should this be done in isolation or independence—rather such a group ought to seek to put itself under the oversight of a properly instituted church, who can then also lawfully call a missionary-pastor to labour with them.

By the grace of God, I can say that the Limerick Reformed Fellowship is a good example of this. Kevin Reed, who recently produced a strong criticism of Prof. Engelsma's *Bound to Join* in the *Trinity Review* (Special Issue 2011), fails to note this essential difference between an isolated group of believers and a solitary isolated believer. This failure is also in his booklet, “Imperious Presbyterianism” *Trinity Review* (June-August 2008), where he also teaches schismatic independentism by denying that such a group must seek to place itself under the oversight of a properly instituted church. A group of believers

may meet together to seek to establish a church, but some kind of lone-ranger cannot, and his calling is to join the true church wherever it may be found. Moving for such a person is not optional, as Kevin Reed claims.

Fourth, that churches change (irrespective of the reasons, and if a minister is the reason for departure, surely the elders ought to exercise their authority to discipline—unless the church already has lost that mark of biblical discipline and Satan operates there instead of Christ) does not excuse the member who remains in a departing or apostate church. Our loyalty is to Christ and His bride, not Satan and the whore of Babylon. If a church changes drastically for the worse, we must not think that it is permissible to stay simply because of what the church used to be like. Instead, we protest patiently and zealously, and if such an institution refuses to submit to the word of Christ, and loses the marks of a true church, such that it can no longer be called the pillar and ground of the truth but is becoming more and more a synagogue of Satan, then it is evident that we must seek the true church elsewhere. Maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is not remaining attached to such rottenness which is filled with a different, contrary, and fundamentally incompatible spirit (II Cor. 6:14-18). It is to cut oneself off from that old leaven, and to be joined to the bread of sincerity and truth. The unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is violated when a believer remains attached to such idolatrous institutions. The Spirit cannot have fellowship with devils (I Cor. 10:16-22), and there can be no peace in the company of the wicked who are like the raging sea. In principle, the peace of God cannot be present in such an unfaithful or departing church, and the Holy Spirit cannot dwell in the temple of idols.

As for the specific churches and denominations mentioned, should a journal which so strongly opposes the false and destructive theology of the free offer and common grace (among other important issues) be promoting these? Is it not incongruous that such manifestly false teachings should be tolerated in these churches, let alone approved, at least with silence? As to the referral to “an enormous plethora of evangelical churches” (not speaking now of the two denominations referred to specifically), I hesitate to respond. Are not most “evangelical” churches thoroughly corrupted with the heresies of charismaticism, independentism, Baptist theology, dispensationalism, Arminianism, feminism, evolutionism, and premillennialism (at least where I am from, this

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is what “evangelical” invariably means)? Is such a suggestion in the pages of the *BRJ* really serious?

Fifth, Scripture is very clear that on the day of Pentecost, those baptised and saved were added to the church (Acts 2:47). This strange new view of baptism as it relates to membership of the church (as discussed in the editorial) has no scriptural basis. And to depart from a faithful church, or stubbornly to refuse to join the true church is without a doubt apostasy, in its most basic form. This is exactly how I John 2:19 describes those who “were not of us.” The reason for this conclusion is given plainly; “for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us.” What other meaning can it have when a person loudly professes their faith, though their life totally contradicts their words (James 2:14-26)? Such people therefore, irrespective of their baptism (and indeed then their baptism would only add to their condemnation), are *extra ecclesia*. In fact, those who are baptised are rendered more responsible to be and remain faithful members of the true church. Confessing members of a Reformed church make vows which are incompatible with not being active members of the church.

Finally, that there is increasing wickedness in society impresses upon us even more the importance of joining the true church, that we are not condemned with the world, and perish by fire, just as the world apart from the ark once perished in the Flood. The worst possible way to react to the rapidly increasing wickedness in these last days would be not to join the true church wherein there is safety, refuge, and blessing, and instead to waste one’s time in pursuing false ecumenism in order to produce fruitless efforts to stem the tide. If God is going to spare us for longer, He will do so in the way of strengthening and adding to the true church. He will not bless any effort which pursues faithless pragmatism above His supreme holiness—in fact, He will curse those who frantically involve themselves in such activities. I have no doubt that the state will become more and more a great enemy of the church. But notice, the world gathers together against the church (Rev. 20:7-9), and, in contrast, those who are not in the beloved city when Satan gathers the world together against us, will find themselves marching alongside Gog and Magog, and will be devoured with fire in the day of Christ’s coming.

As I briefly conclude by noting that II Timothy 3:16-17 was first of all written to Timothy, exhorting him to preach this word (since the gracious efficacy

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of the Word in all these ways is chiefly in hearing the voice of Jesus Christ in the official preaching by those sent as gifts from Him to the church, cf. Eph. 4:11-16), please consider with me the goodness and pleasantness of the church described in Psalm 133:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.

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