

HAROLD CAMPING REFUTED: THE NECESSITY OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE CHURCH (INSTITUTE) (2)

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IV. The Necessity of Church Membership

A. The Testimony of Scripture

Many Christians today rightly deride the nonsensical theories of Harold Camping and would vehemently deny that the church institute is dead. Yet, these same people live as practical Campingites, in that they do not seek membership in a true church institute.

The Scriptures assume that a person upon being converted will join the church, for the Bible does not speak to Christians except as members of the church. So it was in the very beginning of the New Testament era: “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). White remarks: “it was to this organized, recognizable, identifiable body of believers that the Lord added daily those who were being saved.”¹ This needs emphasis. Camping is not the only one to disparage the church institute. Many evangelicals, and even Reformed believers, claim that membership in the institute is not necessary because they are part of the body of Christ and can worship God at home by reading their Bibles, listening to tapes or watching services on the internet. Nevertheless, being part of the church institute is necessary because the saints have need of one another. The church institute is the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:27) and the members of that body exist in co-dependence. One member (of the church institute) may not say to another “I have no need of thee” (I Cor. 12:21). Nor may members exist aloof outside of the body as if they have no need of any of the other members.

The church is important, not because all those who are not members of the institute are unavoidably on the way to hell (no Reformed theologian has ever

¹ White, *Dangerous*, p. 30.

maintained that position) but because God has given to the church alone the means of salvation, the means of grace through which He gives salvation to His elect people and their elect seed. God has given the preaching of the gospel to the church, not to Harold Camping. The founder of Family Radio was not sent by Jesus Christ. He has no authority to preach. Not even Paul himself who was personally commissioned by Jesus Christ dared to preach without being sent by an instituted church (Acts 13:1-3). A man may not preach unless he is sent (Rom. 10:14-15). Christ gives preachers to the church and the church sends them to preach (Eph. 4:11). The church supervises their preaching. All true preachers are accountable to an instituted church. Harold Camping is a law unto himself and is doing untold damage to the church for which one day he must give account to the head of the church, Jesus Christ.

Without preaching there is ordinarily no salvation because “it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (I Cor. 1:21). Young pastor Timothy is enjoined to preach because in so doing he shall save his hearers and himself (I Tim. 4:16). Preaching is vital for spiritual health. Without true preaching the believer becomes weak and is tossed about by every wind of doctrine because he is not under the protection of the pastors and teachers whom Christ has given to His church (Eph. 4:11, 14) and who watch for his soul (Heb. 13:17).

The sacraments also may only be administered by men lawfully ordained by the church. Without church membership, a man cannot be baptised and he cannot receive the Lord’s Supper which God has given to strengthen our faith. One who willfully refuses to become a member of a true church spurns the gifts which God has given to the church for his edification and salvation. Such a “disobedient sheep” is “outside the sheepfold and ... obliged to join it.”²

B. The Testimony of the Creeds

Our Reformed fathers have recognized the necessity of church membership and this conviction has been recorded in the creeds.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* addresses the subject of the church in Lord’s Day 21. Answer 55 teaches that the communion of the saints means that each

² Van Bruggen, *The Church Says Amen*, p. 153.

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one must feel himself bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the advantage and welfare of other members. One does not need to be a member of the church only for one's own good. This is important. One must also pursue membership in order to benefit the other members. Communion of saints involves loving the saints. White is right when he exclaims, "This cannot be done in isolation: it assumes we will know whom the 'brethren' are that we are to love! And this again points us to the importance of membership in the local church."³ Cornelius Plantinga agrees: "We are trying to do a grotesque and sinful thing when we live alone or hold aloof. We are depriving others of the edification and support they need."⁴ De Jong expresses the issue this way:

To be a Christian means to have fellowship with the living Christ and in the same moment with his people. To break this fellowship lightly, on the basis of personal prejudices and insights, is to imperil our salvation.⁵

The *Belgic Confession* is most insistent on this point. In Article 28 the creed lays down an absolute rule. All believers are duty bound to separate themselves from false churches and join the true church institute "wheresoever God has established it." The *Belgic Confession* does not brook any argument. No matter what earthly circumstances prevent him from joining the church the believer must exercise all possible diligence to obey this command. The creed adds "even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment." If that is the case, how much more applicable is this command if one's spouse, children, siblings, parents, and friends are against it!

The threat of princes' edicts and corporal punishment are not empty words. In the Netherlands when the *Belgic Confession* was written (1561), believers were risking all when they left the false church (in that context, Rome) and joined the Reformed churches. Guido de Brès, the author of the *Belgic Confession* was himself martyred. If believers in the sixteenth century were willing

³ White, *Dangerous*, p. 31.

⁴ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *A Place to Stand: A Study of Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Board of Publications of the CRC, 1981), p. 106.

⁵ Peter Y. De Jong, *The Church's Witness to the World*, vol. 2 (Pella, IA: Pella Publishing Inc., 1962), p. 242.

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to risk their lives to join a Reformed church, what ought be said of the many professing believers today who are not willing to undergo any inconvenience to join a true church? How few today are willing to offend family members and friends by leaving an apostate or apostatizing denomination when relatively little is at stake?

The *Westminster Confession* expresses the necessity of church membership when it says that outside of the church is “no ordinary possibility of salvation” (25:2).

The *French Confession* (1559) is very similar to the *Belgic Confession* on this point:

We believe that no one ought to seclude himself and be contented to be alone; but that all jointly should keep and maintain the union of the Church, and submit to the public teaching, and to the yoke of Jesus Christ (Article 26).⁶

The *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) likewise impresses upon us the importance of the church institute:

But we esteem fellowship with the true Church of Christ so highly that we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from it. For as there was no salvation outside Noah’s ark when the world perished in the flood; so we believe that there is no certain salvation outside Christ, who offers himself to be enjoyed by the elect in the Church; and hence we teach that those who wish to live ought not to be separated from the true Church of Christ (Chapter 17).

Those creeds which say that outside the church is no salvation do not intend to consign all but church members to hell. Rather we ought to understand it this way, without minimizing the seriousness of the call to church membership:

God has ordained that salvation is made available for mankind not in the bush or on the beach, nor in the flock of the hireling

⁶ Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, pp. 374-375.

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(John 10:12); salvation is available where Christ is, where His voice is heard ... If I no longer hear and heed God's Word and Law today, I also deprive my children and grandchildren of hearing God's Word. Withdrawal from the church is not a decision for the self only, but it has implications for future generations.⁷

We see, then, that this modern notion, that Christians may live outside the church, is not shared by the Reformed fathers, many of whom sealed their testimony in their own blood.

C. The Testimony of Calvin

In his *Institutes*, Calvin argues strenuously for the necessity of the church institute and inveighs against those who despise her. God has given the church out of His infinite love and mercy. He knows our weaknesses. He understands how feeble our faith is. Therefore He provides means to work faith in us and to strengthen our faith. Calvin likens the church institute to a mother at whose breasts the child of God sucks the pure milk of the word, or to a school where we must always be learning of Christ and His great salvation. "Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives."⁸ "God desires [His people] to grow up to manhood solely under the education of the church."⁹ Calvin warns that "it is always disastrous to leave the church"¹⁰ and criticizes those who in proud contempt of the means God has provided abandon the church:

Many are led either by pride, dislike or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous. But, since they do their utmost to sever or break the sacred bond of unity, no one escapes the

⁷ C. Bouwman, *Notes on the Belgic Confession* (Kelmescott, Western Australia: The League of Free Reformed Women's Bible Study Societies in Australia and Pro Ecclesia Publishers, 1997), pp. 114-115.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (USA & GB: The Westminster Press and S. C. M. Press, 1960), 4.1.4, p. 1016.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5, p. 1017.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.4, p. 1016.

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just penalty of this unholy separation without bewitching himself with pestilent errors and foulest delusions.¹¹

Harold Camping must take note. He has surely been bewitched with foul delusions. But he is not the only one. Many there are today who will not take pains to seek out and join a true church.

Calvin was involved in a controversy during his whole ministry with a group of Protestants in France who called themselves Nicodemites. These Protestants remained in false churches and sought to justify their actions by saying that in their hearts they believed the Reformed Faith but it was too risky for them to worship in a truly Reformed manner. For them the costs were high. Protestants in France suffered horrendous cruelty at the hands of the Roman Catholic authorities. As much sympathy as Calvin had for their plight, he remained insistent that these Christians may not participate in false worship and that their calling was to join a true church. He addressed them in these words: “My advice would be to leave (France) if [they] could.”¹² “Whoever has no means of being in the Christian church where God is worshipped purely let him at least groan night and day.”¹³ “Let them seek every means that are offered them, showing that it was not hypocrisy on their part to ask for deliverance.”¹⁴

The response of many Nicodemites was scorn. Calvin thinks that the road to heaven runs through Geneva! He wants us to “go running to Geneva to get an earful of sermons.”¹⁵ Calvin responded by pointing out the Nicodemites’ hypocrisy. They claimed that they highly esteemed the Reformed faith, yet they were not willing to inconvenience themselves to enjoy the means of grace. They would not hesitate to move for other reasons: “There are none who would not boldly permit themselves to leave their country in order not to die of hunger ... if they were offered six times as many goods in a foreign country, they would have no great problem leaving to take possession.”¹⁶

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.5, p. 1018.

¹² John Calvin, *Come Out From Among Them: Anti-Nicodemite Writings of John Calvin* (Dallas, TX: Protestant Heritage Press, 2003), p. 94.

¹³ Calvin, *Come Out*, pp. 192-193.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Come Out*, p. 95.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Come Out*, p. 181.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Come Out*, p. 202.

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The situation has not changed. There are Reformed Christians living in isolated areas of the world today where there is no true church. Some of them complain about the spiritual wilderness in which they live. Few of them would hesitate to move to a different city if that involved career advancement with a higher salary. But how few today would consider relocating in order to enjoy the inestimable blessing of church membership! Calvin sums it up this way:

Everyone would like to be carried on a litter to worship God ...
and for lands and possessions, goods and business connections
and all other assets to follow right along. Now if they act this
way, how highly do they esteem Jesus Christ?¹⁷

D. Membership in an Apostatizing Church Is No Alternative

Church membership is necessary. We have proved this against the ravings of Harold Camping. However, not membership in every church is acceptable to God. Reformed Christians who, because there is nothing better in the area, worship in, or are even members of liberal Protestant churches, Arminian churches, Pentecostal churches or any other ecclesiastical bodies which do not bear the marks of a true church, are not walking in obedience to Jesus Christ. Nor are Christians who are mere visitors or regular attendees of true churches but have not become and have no intention of becoming members.

Concerning the latter, the *Belgic Confession* impresses upon them their duty of “submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline [of the church]” and “bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ” (Article 28). Mere attendees and well-wishers cannot do this. Scripture tells us that we must place ourselves under the supervision of office-bearers (Heb. 13:17). Elders have no authority over those who are mere attendees. Such attendees cannot partake of the sacraments and they are not subject to church discipline. Christ commands every believer to partake of the sacraments and to obey those men through whom He is pleased to rule His church.

Concerning the former it must be said that membership in an apostatizing church makes the true worship of God impossible and makes one corporately

¹⁷ Calvin, *Come Out*, pp. 215-216.

responsible for the sins of that church or denomination. In a day of individualism few understand that biblical principle. The framers of the *Heidelberg Catechism* understood it very well. They knew that, if the elders knowingly allow an ungodly person to come to the Lord's Table, "the covenant of God is profaned and His wrath provoked against the whole congregation" (Lord's Day 30, Q. & A. 82). The whole congregation, not just the ungodly person, come under the wrath of God. That is how God deals with His people. When Achan stole from the spoils of Jericho, God killed thirty six men, and when Joshua enquired of the Lord, God said, "Israel hath sinned ... they [plural] have ... transgressed" (Josh. 7:11). Achan stole. Nobody or few in Israel knew about Achan's sin, but God held the whole nation responsible.

Such people need also to think about the welfare of their children and grandchildren. An adult Reformed believer may have the discernment to filter out the false doctrine from the sermons he hears in a departing church but his children do not. At best they will be confused, at worst spiritually poisoned by the false doctrine from the pulpit and the corrupting influence of the departing church. Such a Reformed believer needs to do more than bemoan the state of the denomination. He needs to initiate ecclesiastical protest through the correct channels. When he has done this and if his protests have been unsuccessful, then he needs to leave and take his children with him. Remaining indefinitely in a departing or apostate church is not an option for one who loves the truth of Christ.

V. Conclusion

Those who have followed Harold Camping out of the church institute have been seduced out of the sheepfold by "a thief and a robber" (John 10:1). Because Mr. Camping quotes so many passages from the Bible and seems to write with such authority, he has a certain appeal. Nevertheless, stringing passages together which have no logical connection is not faithful Bible exposition but a mockery of the Scriptures.

Family Radio can never replace the church. Camping reduces the function of the church to world evangelization and he insists that the church is not able to fulfill the Great Commission. But remember that the Great Commission includes the command to baptize (Matt. 28:19). Camping has neither

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the authority to preach nor to baptize. God has given no other means for the gathering of the elect than the preaching of the gospel by men called by Christ through His church. Camping ran but the Lord did not send him (Jer. 23:21).

The church is where the voice of Christ is heard through the preaching (John 10:27). Outside the church there are only the voices of strangers, the hissing of serpents, and the growling of wolves. Camping's voice hisses on Family Radio: Come out of the churches! We must resist his call. He would have us dwell in a wilderness where there is only spiritual death and where we and our children are deprived of the pure milk of the word (I Peter 2:2). We dare not follow where he leads.

What will Camping say when he must give account to the Head and Husband of the church? How will he, who has been guilty of seducing Christ's bride, of causing Christ's little ones to stumble, and of trying to demolish Christ's temple, answer Christ on that day? We tremble at the thought and we urgently call him to repentance.

What a blessing it is to enjoy lively membership in a true church. Christ is there. There we enjoy fellowship with the Triune God in covenant friendship as He speaks to us in the preaching and strengthens us through the sacraments. There we experience the gracious protection of His rod and His staff, as He rules us through the office-bearers. How foolish, then, to throw away all of those blessings and to endanger our salvation by leaving her.

Appendix

The following are some examples of the wildly speculative exegesis of Harold Camping. All the references are from *The End of the Church Age ... and After*. Beware of such a "Bible teacher." Notice his many assertions, none of which he proves from the context or from the language of the text itself.

- (1) The star in Revelation 9:1-3 is the Lord Jesus Christ (pp. 8, 86).
- (2) The three and a half years of famine in the days of Elijah typify the three and half years of Christ's earthly ministry (p. 22).
- (3) Isaiah 5 "is speaking about the kingdom of God as it was represented by the local congregations throughout the church age" (pp. 24, 29).

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(4) “We may safely equate the stinking fruit of the church age with the high places of Old Testament Israel” (p. 29).

(5) “We know that the two witnesses (of Rev. 11) represent the true believers who are driven out of the churches or in obedience to God’s command come out of the churches” (pp. 32-33).

(6) “The beast and the false prophet are pictures of Satan as he ruled in the churches during the Great Tribulation” (p. 41).

(7) “The rider on the black horse (Rev. 6) is a warning to the churches that if they do not remain faithful God will begin to take the Gospel away from them” (p. 42).

(8) “The wood, hay and stubble (of I Cor. 3:12) must relate to the church members who are still unsaved” (p. 64).

(9) The beast from the sea is Satan because “in the Bible the sea frequently represents hell” (p. 89).

(10) “The image of Satan (Rev. 13:15) consists of the unsaved within the churches” (p. 97).

(11) The merchant in the parable of the pearl (Matt. 13:45-46) “can only be Christ. The pearl is the kingdom of God. Christ sold all that He had, that is, He emptied himself of His glory and became the suffering servant in order to obtain the kingdom of God” (p. 100).

(12) The woman in Proverbs 31 is a “picture of the believers as we buy without money the Gospel and sell it to others who buy from us without money” (p. 101).

(13) The corn and wine after which the children pine in Lamentations 2:11-12 are “words pointing to the Gospel” (p. 108).¹⁸

¹⁸ Go on-line for further examples (www.cprf.co.uk/articles/campingrefuted.htm#appendix).