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## **REFORMATION & REVIVAL JOURNAL**

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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

## INFORMATION

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in America, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

The views expressed in this publication should be considered as the personal opinions of the authors and are not to be taken as an official editorial perspective.

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION THE CHURCH: WHY BOTHER?

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*John H. Armstrong*

I remember a sign I saw during the turbulent 1960s which struck me as rather indicative of the times. It simply said: "Jesus Yes, the Church No!" That seemed to me, at least at the time, to sum up the feeling of many in my generation. We wanted reality, but we were quite sure the one place we did not find it was the church. During the same era, while still a college undergraduate, I began to experiment with different models of church life. Much of the mystique of this experimentation was the "newness" of each form. It all "felt" so different from church as I had known it. After all, my church seemed so boring, and these small groups seemed so exciting and biblical. This communion on the floor in our jeans with casual singing and open sharing seemed much more like what the early Christians knew after Pentecost.

In time I began to ask, What is the church? Does it even matter? And, in light of the continual divisions and strife that I had seen among believers, why even bother?

### "I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH"

The church is the company of all the redeemed. Other images and expressions are used to describe this redeemed company; e.g., the family of God, the people of God, the elect, the bride of Christ, the communion of saints, the new Israel, etc. But strictly speaking the church is the congregation of all who are committed to the Lord Jesus Christ

on the basis of His promises in the gospel. When I confess my belief in the church universal I am not making the church an object of my faith, but rather the God who calls this church into existence through His Word and Spirit. My trust is in God, but if I confess confidence in God, by design I am confessing that God has called His people into a holy catholic church. Let me explain.

The etymological meaning of the word for church (*ekklesia*) is based upon the Greek word for assembly, or congregation. This compound word has two parts. The first refers to that which comes "out of" (*ek*) and the second to that which is called (*kaleo*). Thus the compound word refers to a people called out of the world by God with the purpose of gathering in His name and for His purpose.

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*Though the Old Testament people of God are in continuity with the church there are some important differences to be noted.*




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The two most common Old Testament words for the covenant community are convocation (*qahal*) and assembly (*'edah*). The Septuagint clearly uses *ekklesia* for these two Hebrew words. The point made by each of these words is this—the church owes her origin and form to the *activity of God* who calls her into existence. Practically this means that the church is not mine or yours, but God's. To speak of "my church" or of "our church" is incorrect. This is true for at

least several reasons. None is more basic and important than this—the church belongs to Christ alone! It is holy because it is His.

Though the Old Testament people of God are in continuity with the church there are some important differences to be noted.

Both the continuity and the discontinuity between Israel and the church reflect this change in the form of the covenant, which took place at Christ's coming.

The features of the new covenant are as follows: First, the Old Testament priests, sacrifices, and sanctuary are superseded by the mediation of Jesus, the crucified, risen and reigning God-man (Heb. 1–10), in whom believers now find their identity as the seed of Abraham and the people of God (Gal. 3:29; 1 Peter 2:4–10).

Second, the ethnic exclusivism of the old covenant (Deut. 7:6; Ps. 147:19–20) is replaced by the inclusion in Christ on equal terms of believers from all nations (Eph. 2:3; Rev. 5:9–10).

Third, the Spirit is poured out both on each Christian and on the church, so that fellowship with Christ (1 John 1:3), ministry from Christ (John 12:32; 14:18; Eph. 2:17), and foretastes of heaven (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14) become realities of churchly experience.<sup>1</sup>

One of the oldest Christian confessions known in the West is The Apostles' Creed. In this creed we confess: "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church." What is it that we actually confess in this statement? Namely, that we believe in the *universal* nature of the church (cf. Eph. 4:4). We confess, with the ancient church and the apostles, that we also believe that all who are His have been baptized by Christ in one Holy Spirit into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). We say we believe the church to be the total number of God's children joined together by their common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This one people is known as "the church of God

which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

In a broad and salvific sense this one body includes all the redeemed from all ages, both those in heaven and those on earth. This is why we sometimes speak of the *church triumphant* (as in heaven) and the *church militant* (on earth still fighting the great battles of faith). This one church is to be found wherever Christians are found. It is international in scope and composed of "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues" (Rev. 7:9). Therefore the elect of God are organically related to one another by virtue of their union with a common Lord. All temporal distinctions are superseded by this unity (cf. Gal. 3:27–28; Rev. 5:9–10). To not seek the preservation of the unity of the church is a great sin.

Herman Bavinck, the famous Dutch theologian, wrote:

Election comprises a very great multitude out of all generations, languages, people and nations. True, it is personal and individual, and has specific human beings known to God by name as its object, but it selects these in such a way and combines them in such a way that they altogether form the temple of God, the body and bride of Christ. The purpose of the election is the creation of an organism, that is, the redemption, renewal, and glorification of a regenerated mankind which proclaims the excellencies of God and bears His name upon its forehead.<sup>2</sup>

### THE GLORY OF CHRIST PRESENTLY IN THE CHURCH

Further, there is an inherent glory to be seen in the church. This glory is not observed merely by human sight. It is given by divine revelation. Practical sorts never seem to pause long enough to contemplate this glory. They are simply too busy seeking to make things happen, too busy trying to build churches and programs that will "meet the needs" of their people. But by design the church is appoint-

ed by God to reveal Him. He promises to build His church (Matt. 16:18). Paul states plainly in his letter to Ephesus that Christ's glory in this age is revealed in and through His church when he says:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen (Eph. 3:14–21).

The glory is to be revealed in the church. How? Through the gracious saving activity of God uniting us to Christ. This activity constitutes, in itself, the true glory of Christ on the earth today. It is known in those who are redeemed and it is revealed in and through the church. Why, then, bother with the church? Because God does and we must.

### THE CHURCH DEPENDS UPON DIVINE POWER

The life of the church, both her continuation and preservation in the earth, depends not upon favorable conditions, politically or religiously. The life of the church depends entirely upon the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. As one Reformed theologian has succinctly written:

The life and preservation of the church depends upon the

power and presence of the indwelling Spirit. In short—the church depends for her origin, gathering and preservation wholly upon the divine initiative and sovereign grace of God.<sup>3</sup>

But this universal church must find expression. It is a living organism, but this organism must take form and organization as well. Clearly the most common New Testament usage of the word “church” points to this visible community of people (e.g., the church in Ephesus, the church in Antioch, etc.).

How does each local congregation relate to the universal church? Herman Bavinck is once again helpful when he concludes:

With an eye to the glorious virtues which the apostles ascribe to the church, some observers have wanted to make a distinction between the empirical and the ideal church. But such a Western distinction is foreign to the New Testament. When the apostles, following in the example of Christ, speak so gloriously, especially in John 14–17, of the church, they are not thinking of something which exists in the abstract or in thought only, nor of an ideal which we are to follow after which we will probably never attain. They always have in mind, rather, the whole and actual church, that body of which the gatherings of believers in the various localities and countries and the various times are the particular revelations. Those revelations, it is true, are all of them very defective still—and to this the apostles in all their letters testify; but they are revelations nevertheless of a reality lying behind them, actualizations of a counsel of God carrying itself out from generation to generation.<sup>4</sup>

We must keep these two truths together, especially when one has been surrendered or almost forgotten. Bavinck calls these two great truths the “vanguard and the

rearguard of the great army of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> This is why the apostles speak the way they do regarding the church. The local congregation at Corinth, for example, is called the temple of God, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; 12:27). With all of its problems and manifold difficulties the assembly in Corinth was still a true church. It was a “small-scale representative sample” in “microcosm” of the universal church.<sup>6</sup> We need to understand this simple fact. We have stressed the truth that each individual believer is the dwelling place of God to such exclusion of such an idea that rarely do we properly stress that each local church is likewise a temple of the Spirit.

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*To walk by faith and not by sight always means you must trust God's Word and explicitly obey Him in all circumstances. Nowhere is this more difficult, at least in the West, than regarding the church of Jesus Christ.*



#### REFORMATION AND THE CHURCH TODAY

To walk by faith and not by sight always means you must trust God's Word and explicitly obey Him in all circumstances. Nowhere is this more difficult, at least in the West, than regarding the church of Jesus Christ. Let me explain.

A growing number of Christians are recovering the great truths of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reforma-



tion. God has been graciously restoring, in the midst of what has been a long season of judgment, the glory of His grace. A growing number of people are tired of man-centered Christianity. They long to see the banner of sovereign grace unfurled again. Their hearts have been profoundly moved by the sheer God-centeredness of the Bible. They sense the need to bring their lives, their families and their vocations under the sovereignty of God in both thought and action.

But what about the church? How do we relate this ongoing modern reformation to the church? In the end isn't the best path simply to "start over" and begin altogether new churches?

In some cases starting new churches may be the best alternative, especially when existing churches oppose the gospel and refuse movement toward biblical reformation. In most cases, however, the issue is not really reformation but the slowness with which this is being pursued. Or the inability of the leaders to see the need for reformation.

Individuals may need to seek out another church, in some cases. Others may see the need to remain and pursue the reformation of a particular local congregation. Church forms and government will have a lot to do with all of this. But what about pastors?

#### MODERN REFORMATION AND CHURCH LEADERS

Nelson Kloosterman, professor at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, Indiana, gave a chapel address in 1990 that has profoundly affected my own view of these things. Let me allow him to counsel you about reforming the church. In part he said:

... if we walk pastorally and homiletically by sight instead of by faith, on the basis of what we see rather than what God's

Word teaches about the church, we'll be undercutting our own ministry and the very Word we attempt to proclaim.

Perhaps there's no place in the church where that confession of faith—"I believe in a holy catholic church"—is more dim and difficult than behind the pulpit. Perhaps no church member has more trouble living out that faith-confession than the pastor.

No marriage can survive continuous carping and careless criticism. And if your task as pastors is to help prepare the Bride for the coming wedding feast, then the task of this seminary is to prepare you to be the best, most selfless, poimenic (in contrast to "polemic") helpers possible.

... [W]e succumb to that danger of viewing ourselves as the church's moral elite when we exercise a heartless impatience toward those in the church who, through culpable ignorance, need the kind of careful shepherding that may have been withheld from them for decades.

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*We succumb to that danger of viewing ourselves as the church's moral elite when we exercise a heartless impatience toward those in the church who, through culpable ignorance, need the kind of careful shepherding that may have been withheld from them for decades.*



Among the best pieces of advice you could receive in seminary is this: Meditate on the mystery of the Church of Jesus Christ.

For meditation on this mystery will produce the antibiotics you will need to combat the infectious intellectual and moral cynicism that is causing ecclesiastical ulcers among seminarians and clergy.

. . . you will indeed become frustrated if you cannot minister in faith.

For you must know that the time will come when as pastors you will SEE so many things wrong with the church, that you'll have barely enough energy to BELIEVE the good about her.

What you and I need . . . is to confess, and to study in terms of that confession, that the church of Jesus Christ is as much an article of faith—unseen by our well-trained, theologically-scoped eye—as regeneration, or justification by faith.<sup>7</sup>

We must not ignore the need for true reformation. We must not easily settle for churches that do not have the marks—i.e., a preaching of the Word of God, a right practice of the sacraments and sound biblical discipline in practice. We must understand that there is a difference between corruption, which affects all institutions, including the church, and apostasy, which is to deny and fall away from Christ entirely. A church becomes apostate when it denies an essential tenet of Christian faith such as the deity of Christ, the Trinity, justification by faith alone, the atoning sacrifice of Christ's death, etc. To fail to understand and preach these truths brings inevitable corruption, and thus the need for reformation. To deny these essential truths is a sign of apostasy.

All true leaders will strive to strengthen (or recover) the marks of the church if they know the New Testament and are faithful to their calling. But as Kloosterman adds, ". . . we will be able to test the church's reality by her fruits (hence: the marks of the church). But that testing will, can, and must be done only in, as, and by the community of God's people."<sup>8</sup>

If we who lead would do this we must often meditate, as Kloosterman urges, on the mystery of the church.

This issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal* seeks to help Christian leaders meditate on the mystery of the church and upon the need for modern reformation.

We profoundly agree with this observation that "Any local church anywhere that is spiritually alive will undoubtedly take its singing, praying, and preaching very seriously indeed, and be jealous for all three."<sup>9</sup>

This issue takes up these concerns precisely because we do take the reformation of the church quite seriously. Thus we include an article on several of the English Reformers who sought the reformation of the church in their time and paid for their effort with their lives. We must be soberly reminded by such history what it sometimes costs to work for true reformation.

John Thornbury, a pastor for nearly forty years and a frequently published author, has written for this publication in previous issues. In this number he tackles a concern for multitudes of Baptist (and other independent congregational) leaders who are laboring for reformation in our time. What is the role of confessions in our polity? Is our only creed really the Bible?

Further, we must look at the character of the reformer if we would address the church in our time. No one can lead who does not work from the position of godly character. In addition to this we ponder the importance of 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 in two different articles, one which examines the modern church growth movement.

Finally, we consider the worship and music of the church in two articles. This is a theme taken up in this publication previously but continually needed in light of the confusion that presently exists. Some of us are so weary of the lack of musical integrity in the church that we wonder if we will ever see change. I believe the insight of these arti-

cles will help leaders think soberly about the church in this regard.

In all of this our prayer must be that we who love the church will seek its biblical reformation with all earnest effort joined with prayers and tears. The counsel of a great American theologian might well guide us in our effort:

I love Thy kingdom Lord,  
The house of Thine abode,  
The church our blest Redeemer saved,  
With His own precious blood.

I love Thy church, O God!  
Her walls before Thee stand,  
Dear as the apple of Thine eye,  
And graven on Thy hand.

For her my tears shall fall;  
For her my prayers ascend;  
To her my cares and toils be giv'n,  
Till toils and cares shall end.

Beyond my highest joy  
I prize her heav'nly ways,  
Her sweet communion, solemn vows,  
Her hymns of love and praise.

Jesus, Thou friend Divine,  
Our Saviour and our King,  
Thy hand from ev'ry snare and foe  
Shall great deliv'rance bring.

Sure as Thy truth shall last,  
To Zion shall be giv'n  
The brightest glories earth can yield,  
And brighter bliss of heav'n.

—Timothy Dwight

### Notes

1. James I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale, 1993), 199–200.
2. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 515.
3. Cornelis Venema, "I Believe in a Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints," *Outlook* (November 1991), 18.
4. Bavinck, 520–21.
5. *Ibid.*, 521.
6. Packer, 201.
7. Nelson Kloosterman, "A Chapel Meditation" given on February 13, 1990, *The Mid-America Messenger* (8:7, March 1990), 1–2.
8. *Ibid.*, 2.
9. Packer, 203.