

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Local Church: A Confessional Perspective

Simply having the word *Church* on a sign in front a building does not guarantee that this is a Biblical Church.¹ The English word “Church” can be traced back to the Greek adjective KURIAKOS, lit. “The Lord’s” or “belonging to the Lord” (the word is found in I Cor. 11:20 and Rev. 1:10). The German word KIRCHE and the Scottish KIRK are sister terms from which the English word probably evolved. The Greek word is EKKLESIA, and the Latin, ECCLESIA, is a simple transliteration of the Greek from whence we have coined the theological category ECCLESIOLOGY. George Barna affirms that belonging to the universal and invisible Church is the only thing that really matters. Therefore, association and involvement in a local church is not all that important. The scriptures clearly make a distinction between the *universal* church of all ages, the elect “the heavenly Jerusalem the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven” (Heb. 12:22-23) and the local visible congregations. For example, the historic Protestant creeds distinguish between the *visible* church and the *invisible* church (cf. Westminster Confession (1646), chapter 25; the Scottish Confession of Faith (1560), chapters 16 and 18). But Barna, like so many Evangelicals, does not see the importance of creeds and confessions, and as such does not even mention them. After all, this modern mindset (which is ensnared in what C. S. Lewis called chronological snobbery) confidently declares, “Who really cares about such old dusty and antiquated things like creeds and confessions?” It is a sad fact, but Christians who ignore them simply impoverish themselves. The importance of creeds and confessions, therefore cannot be underestimated. The Westminster Confession elaborates on the doctrine of the church when it says, “The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan” (25:5). This statement does not purport to tell us how we may “rate” churches in a dubious condition, nor does the Confession commend believers to “less pure” churches which have not yet fully degenerated into synagogues of Satan (Rev. 2:9). Rather, the Westminster Confession lets stand the previous creedal doctrine that calls upon men to seek out a true church, one clearly discerned by the right marks. The marks of the church are treated in The Confession of the English Congregation at Geneva (1556), the French Confession of Faith (1559), articles 26-28; the Scottish Confession of faith (1560), chapters 16 and 18, and the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), articles 27-29; Second Helvetic Confession(1566), chapter 17. French Confession of Faith (1559), article 27. The Belgic Confession (1561) says, “We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true Church, since all the sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church” (article 29). The Scottish Confession says, “Because that Satan from the beginning has laboured to deck his pestilent synagogue with the title of the kirk of God, and has inflamed the hearts of cruel murderers to persecute, trouble, and molest the true kirk and members thereof it is a thing most requisite that the true kirk be discerned from the filthy synagogue, by clear and perfect notes, lest we, being deceived, receive and embrace to our own condemnation the one for the other” (chapter 18). Belgic Confession, article 28. In some cases, there

may not be a preexisting true congregation near a believer's home. Still, the imperative to separate from false churches remains. In such irregular circumstances, where there is not an acceptable preexisting church, the believer would be encouraged to help form one or, perhaps, move to a location near a true congregation. During the Reformation, Protestants formed numerous "house churches" sometimes called *privy congregations*, and often held "underground" meetings. (See Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 17).²

CONCLUSION: I close this brief look at what our Reformed Confessions have to say about our subject with this quote from Samuel Miller, one of the founding faculty members of Princeton Theological Seminary. "It is the general principle of the enemies of creeds, that all who profess to believe the Bible, ought, without further inquiry, to unite; to maintain ecclesiastical communion; and to live together in peace. But is it not manifest, that the only way in which those who essentially differ from each other concerning the fundamental doctrines of the gospel can live together in perfectly harmonious ecclesiastical fellowship is by becoming indifferent to truth: in other words, by becoming persuaded that modes of faith are of little or no practical importance to the Church, and are, therefore, not worth contending for; that clear and discriminating views of Christian doctrine are wholly unnecessary, and of little use in the formation of Christian character? But in proportion as professing Christians are indifferent to truth, will they not be apt to neglect the study of it? And if the study of it be generally neglected, will not gross and deplorable ignorance of it eventually and generally prevail? The fact is, when men love gospel truth well enough to study it with care, they will soon learn to estimate its value; they will soon be disposed to 'contend for it' against its enemies, who are numerous in every age; and this will inevitably lead them to adopt and defend that 'form of sound words' which they think they find in the sacred Scriptures. On the other hand, let any man imbibe the notion that creeds and confessions are unscriptural, and of course unlawful, and he will naturally and speedily pass to the conclusion, that all contending for doctrines is useless, and even criminal. From this the transition is easy to the abandonment of the study of doctrine, or, at least, the zealous and diligent study of it. Thus it is, that laying aside all creeds naturally tends to make professing Christians indifferent to the study of Christian truths, comparatively uninterested in the attainment of religious knowledge; and, finally, regardless, and, of course ignorant of *the faith once delivered to the saints*"³

ENDNOTES

¹ Aberrant *Churches* abound! Here are just a couple of examples: There are a number of Christian Nudists camps across the country with worship services and Bible Studies (clothing optional but discouraged). They have *Evangelical* doctrinal statements and claim representatives from among every major denomination. <http://www.alittleleaven.com/2007/08/christian-nudis.html>. Especially disturbing are the growing number of professing Evangelical churches that have become excessively preoccupied with sex as a drawing card. Not long ago, a mega-church here in Mesa advertised XXX rated sermons with a parental notice alerting parents that material in the Sunday Service was inappropriate for children! Mark Driscoll has achieved nationwide notoriety as "the cussing pastor." His church in Seattle – Mars Hill, has a website that contains a MH-17 Warning: Under 17 Requires Adult permission. They have a link to a group known as *Christian Nymphos* – a group of women who offer very explicit advice on how to spice-up the bedroom. Churches who mimic this kind of trendy stuff are on the increase. Ed Young, the pastor of the second largest mega church in the U.S.A., gained nationwide attention by doing a series of explicit sermons on sex using a king size bed as a back drop. His language is laced with profanity, including words like "crap," "screwed," "hell" and presumably milder but still scatological (bathroom humor) words like "stinks" and "poopyhead." Oh, and of course, "sucks." http://www.churchmarketingsucks.com/archives/2009/06/ed_young_the_cu.htm.

² For an extended analysis, see Kevin Reed, "The Marks of The Church" available at http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/4_shipwr.htm.

³ Samuel Miller, Doctrinal Integrity: The Utility and Importance of Creeds and Confessions and Adherence to Our Doctrinal Standards (rpt. Presbyterian Heritage Publications 1989) p. 19.