

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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### HOW IMPORTANT IS CHURCH?

In C. S. Lewis' little gem of a book, *The Screwtape Letters*, he early on pinpoints one of Satan's favorite tactics: dissatisfaction with the Church and God's people. Screwtape, the senior demon writes these words to Wormwood, "One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print. When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like 'the body of Christ' and the actual faces in the pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy's side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous. At his present stage, you see, he has an idea of 'Christians' in his mind which he supposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial. His mind is full of togas and sandals and armour and bare legs and the mere fact that the other people in church wear modern clothes is a real—though of course an unconscious—difficulty to him. Never let it come to the surface; never let him ask what he expected them to look like. Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords."<sup>1</sup> Screwtape's advice is sadly being promoted today by the likes of Harold Camping and others. The run away best-selling "Christian" novel, *The Shack*, heaped disdain on anything and everything remotely associated with the local church. Not to be out done, the very influential pollster, George Barna, pitched in with a book entitled *Revolution*, where Barna calls upon Christians to become revolutionaries by abandoning the institutional Church and going *solo*, as a new way of "doing church." This approach seeks to customize one's spiritual needs, primarily around the internet, as a new model for a personalized faith experience. Everything is built around the individual. Here is how Barna put it. "The United States is home to an increasing number of revolutionaries. These people are devout followers of Jesus Christ, who are serious about their faith, who are constantly worshipping and interacting with God, and whose lives are centered on their belief in Christ. Some of them are aligned with a congregational church, but many of them are not. The key to understanding revolutionaries is not what church they attend, or even if they attend. Instead, it's their complete dedication to being thoroughly Christian by viewing every moment of life through a spiritual lens and making every decision in light of biblical principles. *These are individuals who are determined to glorify God every day, through every thought, word and deed in their lives*" (p. 8). Elsewhere he noted, "Whether you become a Revolutionary immersed in, minimally involved in, or completely disassociated from a local church is irrelevant to me (and, within boundaries, to God). What matters is not whom you associate with (i.e. a local church), but who you are" (p. 39). According to Barna, the local church is non-essential. Barna wasn't done. He later co-authored another book with Frank Viola, with this intriguing title *Pagan Christianity: Exploring Roots of our Church Practices*. Practically everything associated with the local Church is labeled "pagan."<sup>2</sup> Thankfully, there are books out there that have responded to this kind of nonsense. One of them, authored by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck made this excellent point. "Church isn't boring because we're not showing enough film clips, or because we play an organ instead of guitar. It's boring because we neuter it of its importance. Too often we treat our spiritual lives like the round of golf used to open George Barna's

*Revolution.* At the end of my life, I want my friends and family to remember me as someone who battled for the Gospel, who tried to mortify sin in my life, who fought hard for life, and who contended earnestly for the faith. Not just a nice guy who occasionally noticed the splendor of the mountains God created, while otherwise just trying to enjoy myself, manage my schedule, and work on my short game.”<sup>3</sup> Our text in Hebrews underscores the importance of the local church and why it is absolutely essential to the individual believer.

I. **OBLIGATIONS: THREE EXHORTATIONS**

“The first,” says Guthrie, “refers to personal devotion, the second to consistency and the third to social obligations.”<sup>4</sup>

A. **Our Duty to God: Draw Near**

The principal qualification is *a true heart* (cf. Psalm 51:6 and John 4:24). This refers to more than just sincerity. Specifically, it has reference to have a firm and steadfast confidence in the mediatorial work of Christ as our great high priest (Hebrews 4:14 - 16).

B. **Our Duty as Believers: Hold Fast Our Confession**

The word translated *confession*, is the Greek word *homologia*. “Biblical *homologia* (a term that means ‘to say the same thing’ and so ‘agreement’) indicate, not only the individual’s ties to Jesus Christ and his confession (particularly regarding Jesus’ person and word), but also that of the Christian community, in which the members collectively and openly gave expression to their faith, and in which in consequence they were united. The *homologia* were a declaration of faith that would seem to have assumed one or other fixed form in various circumstances and places was spoken aloud—in public gatherings (Philippians 2:11), on special occasions (I Timothy 6:12), in preaching (Romans 10:8 - 10), in encounters with the Jews (John 9:22; 12:42), with pagans (I Timothy 6:13), and with heretics (I John 4:2 - 3). As examples of the various *homologia* we might cite the following: *Jesus is the Messiah* (John 7:26, 41; 9:22; Mark 8:29); *Jesus is the Son of God* (John 1:34, 50), or these two in combination—*Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God* (John 11:27; 20:31); *Jesus is Lord* (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11; I Corinthians 12:3); *Jesus, the Son of David* (Matthew 12:23).”<sup>5</sup> Since this profession of faith is centered on the Person and Work of Christ, it cannot be understood to be centered abstractly on God apart from Christ. Robert Traill wisely wrote: “In the considering of that faith that we make the profession of, we must consider that God that is to be believed on. Faith natively, faith ultimately, terminates on God: *That your faith and hope might be in God*, I Peter 1:21, where he joins them both together. There can be no believing where God is unknown, there is no believing in an unknown God. God cannot be known as the object of faith, but only as in Christ Jesus. It is impossible that God can be grasped, may I so speak, by the faith of a poor sinner, but only as this God reveals himself to us in Christ Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

C. **Our Duty to The Church: Encouragement to Christian Love and Service**

The word *paroxusmos* is rendered *stir up* in the ESV. The KJV has *provoke*. The word means to incite or work up. “And there is more in it,” wrote John Owen, “than a bare mutual exhortation; there is an excitation of spirit, by exhortation, example, rebuke, until it be warmed unto a duty. This is the great end of the communion that is among Christians in the mutual consideration of one another: considering the circumstances, conditions, walkings, abilities for usefulness, of one another, they do excite one another unto love and good works; which is called the provocation of them, or the stirring up of the minds of men unto them. This was the way and practice of the Christians of old, but is now generally lost, with most of the principles of practical obedience, especially those which concern our mutual edification, as if they had never been prescribed in the gospel.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, note the admonition *not neglecting to meet together* (the assembly of the Church). “The failure of love shows itself, then, in selfish individualism, and specifically here in *the habit of some of neglecting to meet together*. Such unconcern for one’s fellow believers argues unconcern for Christ himself and portends the danger of apostasy, concerning which our author is about to issue another earnest warning (vv. 26ff.). It is important, therefore, that the reality of Christian love should be demonstrated in the personal relationships and mutual concerns of the Christian community. And it will be found that not only does love promote fellowship but also that fellowship stimulates love, because it is by meeting together as a true community that Christians have the opportunity for *encouraging one another* by mutual support, and exhortation.”<sup>8</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** Harold Camping declares the church age is over—no need for pastors, elders, deacons, or the Lord’s Supper, and baptism. This is a very serious error and one that will harm people who follow Camping. Equally as dangerous is the aberrant views of Barna and Viola. But perhaps more insidious are the advocates of the seeker-sensitive, user-friendly marketing mentality that drives the mega-churches like Willow Creek and Saddleback. John MacArthur is right when he states, “Nothing in Scripture indicates the church should lure people to Christ by presenting Christianity as an attractive option...The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (I Corinthians 1:18). There is no way to make it otherwise and be faithful to the message...The gospel itself is disagreeable, unattractive, repulsive, and alarming to the world. It exposes sin, condemns pride,

convicts the unbelieving heart, and shows human righteousness—even the best, most appealing aspects of human nature—to be worthless, defiled filthy rags (cf. Isaiah 64:6).” Spurgeon warned his day, “when the old faith is gone, and enthusiasm for the gospel is extinct, it is no wonder that people seek something else in the way of delight. Lacking bread, they feed on ashes; rejecting the way of the Lord, they run greedily in the path of folly.” Peter Jennings, to my knowledge, is not a believer, but in the video *In the Name of God* he asks a thought provoking question: “As these churches try to attract sell-out crowds are they in danger of selling out the gospel?” It is a worthy question. Well’s assessment is close to the truth, “The church is losing its voice. It should be speaking powerfully to the brokenness of life in this postmodern world and applying the balm of truth to wounds that are fresh and open, but it is not. It is adrift.”<sup>9</sup> One reason for the kind of books like Barna’s is traceable to the whole concept of marketing the Church like a franchise. Barna was actually the leading figure back in the 80’s in getting churches to do this very thing. Everything was structured around a sociological (and not a theological) understanding of the church as community—primarily as an audience with entertainment serving as the drawing card. Interestingly enough, about the time Barna was promoting this kind of thing, noted sociologist Robert Bellah wrote his influential book *Habits of Heart* that described this development, this form of individualism as “Sheilaism.” Bellah used the term in reference to one of the individuals in his book, “Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and who describes her faith as “Sheilaism.” ‘I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.’ Sheila’s faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many. In defining ‘my own Sheilaism’ she says: ‘It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with your self. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think he (God) would want us to take care of each other.’”<sup>10</sup> Bellah concluded that the vast majority of Americans operated with the notion that the individuals should form their own belief system independent of the input of Religious institutions. Organized religion was viewed as a hindrance to religious privatism. Back then the churches that Barna was influencing was preoccupied with attracting and serving the individual. The focus has shifted and Barna now, ever in lock step with the prevailing winds, is changing to keep pace. I will say this—the kind of ‘seeker-sensitive’, ‘user-friendly’ churches that Barna influenced back then can rightly be said to have caused the very problem that now exists. After all who really needs THAT kind of ‘church’ when all that they offered, i.e. entertainment and therapeutic coddling can be had elsewhere? These kinds of ‘churches’ are totally expendable. Sadly, however, what Barna and others like him are offering likewise falls drastically short of what the Bible teaches about the importance of the communion of the saints that is centered in the New Testament understanding of the local church.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (rpt. Touchstone, 1996), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Barna and Viola are guilty of committing every kind of historical fallacy imaginable! See the review by Peter Jones. <http://www.reformation21.org/shelf-life/pagan-christianity-exploring-roots-of-our-church-pr...>

<sup>3</sup> K. DeYoung and T. Kluck, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion* (Moody, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> D. Guthrie *Hebrews: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (IVP, 1983), p. 213.

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Heyns, *The Church* (NGKB, 1980), p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Works of Robert Traill III* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1975), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> John Owen *An Exposition of the Epistle To The Hebrews VI* (rpt. Baker, 1980), p. 519.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Hughes, *A Commentary On The Epistle to The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 415.

<sup>9</sup> As cited in Gary Gilley, *This Little Church Went to Market: Is The Modern Church Reaching Out or Selling Out* (Evangelical Press, 2005), p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> As cited by David Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ In a Postmodern World* (Eerdmans, 2005), p. 150.