

Is the Church an Essential Element of the Gospel?

When we receive Christ as our personal savior, are we left as orphans, or are we joined to a family? The Bible clearly teaches the latter. In the words of Paul,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph. 2:19-22)

To be sure, the Christian life and even a true conversion to Christ assumes participation in a local church! Think about it, even as Christ was about to ascend into heaven, one of his last words to the people he was leaving behind was “and behold, I am with you until the end of the age.” What a strange thing to say! The “age” that Jesus referenced is elsewhere in the Bible described as lasting between Christ’s first coming and his second—an age where Christ is not bodily present! So how is it that Christ is “with us” we might ask?

The answer the Bible gives us is by the power of the Holy Spirit acting in and through the church. For instance, it can be shown that throughout redemptive history, there was never an “age” wherein the salvation of God was NOT identified with and transacted by God’s divine presence, even as his presence is mediated by means of a divinely instituted social organization set apart as God’s “royal and holy priesthood” in her missional activity (c.f. 1Pet.2:9 as per Ex.19:6). True spirituality and discipleship in the Old Testament era was described as experienced through a "dwelling place" and "tabernacle," even as covenants were initiated and sealed through rites whereby God manifested his presence to his people. (c.f. Gen.15, 26:24, Ex. 29:42, Dt. 12:5. Lev. 22:3, Ps.76.2, Pss 76:2, Num.35:34).

In the new covenant, Christ’s promise in Matthew 28: 20, to be with us is a reference to his coming to us in the person and work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. (cf. John 14:18 compared to Acts 1-2) In other words, the advent of the Holy Spirit was not a reference to an individualistic and democratized presence of God. It was a reference to the formation of a new covenant temple wherein Christ will "fill all in all" as explicitly stated, "for the church which is his body..." (cf. Eph.1:22, see also Eph.2:19-22 and then Eph.4:10ff). It is as Leslie Newbigin once recognized:

The Bible is not (*merely*) the story of ideas about God, but the story of the people of God...the gospel does not come to each of us in isolation. It comes to us through a particular book and through a particular fellowship... it is a false spirituality, divorced from the whole teaching of the Bible, which regards this visible and continuing church as of subordinate importance for the life of Christ. God meets us through his people here and now in the form of an actual invitation into the fellowship of a body of people calling themselves one Church.

Do you want to become a Christian? Do you want God to transform your life? Then you will want to participate in a fellowship of believers so organized after the “apostolic foundation set upon the cornerstone of Christ” wherein Christ dwells in our midst through the authorized ministry of his word, sacraments, and fellowship! For when a person once asked the apostle Peter, “what must we do to be saved,” the apostle did not merely say “pray this prayer with me...” Rather, he said, “turn away (from your idols) and “be baptized, every one of you...!” Baptism as a sign signifies “new life in Christ.” Baptism as a function enters us into the visible church of Christ. (Acts 2:38ff)

If you have not been baptized, you should do so even as this involves joining a church. If you have been baptized, but are not presently an active member of a gospel believing church, then you should begin whatever process it takes to locate a church that will enable you to experience the continued and life changing power of the gospel.

Prayer:

Dear God, I ask you to be present in my life, even as you have promised to be with me until the end of this age! God, even as you are present in me by the indwelling Holy Spirit, I desire your full presence as also mediated to me through the visible church. Help me therefore, that I may take the necessary steps to join with your people and live in the fullness of life with Christ, “who fills all in all, that is for the church which is his body.”

For further reading on this, see “The Good News of Church Membership?” at <http://www.christpresnewhaven.org/Resources.htm>