

Sola Ecclesia The Lost Reformation Doctrine

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With which of the following statements are you in greater agreement?

1. "Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God."
2. "Away from [the church] one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation."

For the average evangelical Christian the first statement may lack some balance, but the second sounds downright Romish. If this describes your reaction, then your ecclesiology is closer to the author of the first, Lenny Bruce, than to the author of the second, John Calvin (*Institutes* 4.1.1). Bruce, satirist of organized religion and nemesis to hypocrisy, a comedian notorious for his vulgarity and impiety, nevertheless expressed a common contemporary assessment of organized religion, while Calvin's statement seemed to betray his role as one of the primary catalysts of the Protestant Reformation.

While most of us will admit that the church is a vital aid in nurturing people in the faith, few of us might go as far as Calvin's statement. We've seen deadness and apostasy in many parts of the visible Church. We've watched navel-gazing — lethargy and infighting in the Church become a stumbling block to the world. We've accepted and endorsed evangelistic ministries that operate outside the Church. We believe deeply in that central Reformation doctrine of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, not by church membership. But at issue is not an archaic, hierarchical, colonial view of the Church. At the heart of the matter is the very nature of the Gospel. I invite you to reconsider your understanding of the Gospel through a better understanding of the Church and the biblical connection between the two.

"Gospel" means good news. But good news *of what*? Grammatically, "gospel" requires a genitive. If I said to you, "I have good news," you would ask me about what. Popularly,

people believe the good news is different things — Jesus dying for sin, grace, justification, adoption, reconciliation, and peace with God. One responds to this news by “receiving Jesus in his heart” or “accepting Christ as his personal savior.”¹ Biblically, the good news is the good news of *the Kingdom of God/heaven*. The things mentioned above are implications of the coming of the Kingdom. Biblically, the response is to repent and believe the good news that the Kingdom has come in Christ.

Luke wrote, “The Law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the Kingdom of God is proclaimed ...” (Luke 16:16). In Acts, often cited as a more pure model for evangelism and church life, the Kingdom of God was the content of the apostolic preaching (Acts 8:12, 14:22, 19:8, 20:25, 28:23, 31). Every other description of the Gospel in the New Testament is a consequence of the Kingdom of God being inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus.²

Once we understand that the Gospel is about the Kingdom, we must ask ourselves “What is the Kingdom of God?”³ At its most basic level, the Kingdom is the reign and rule of God administered through Jesus Christ. The good news is that this Kingdom has been brought to bear through Christ. Seeing the unbreakable connection between Gospel and Kingdom, we also see how Christ’s roles as Savior and Lord are inseparable. To repent and believe the Gospel is to acknowledge that Christ is king, to submit one’s will to his, to be ruled over by him in his dispensation of mercy, justice, and love.

But how does Christ rule over his Kingdom? How does he administer his kingship? He does so through the Church, to which he has given the Kingdom’s keys (Matthew 16:19), the gifts of office (Ephesians 4:8ff.), his own shepherd voice in the preaching of the Word (Romans 10:14, 17), his faithful shepherd’s care (1 Peter 5:1-5) and the means of grace (Acts 2:42). To be without the Church is to be at odds with Christ’s rule — his protection, provision, and tender discipline.

Therefore, Calvin’s view of the Church is not Romish, speculative or cultural. It is biblical. And so the confession is thoroughly biblical that “The visible Church . . . is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 25.2).

We must, of course, make a biblical distinction between the visible and invisible Church. But the invisible cannot be seen. There is no invisible baptism, Lord’s table, preached Word, discipline, or Sabbath. We must also note with care *Westminster’s* qualification of

¹ Though I have used these expressions in the past, I honestly cannot find any warrant for them in Scripture.

² Contrary to classic Dispensationalism, the New Testament teaches that Christ brought in the Kingdom by his death/burial/resurrection — not that it was delayed by his rejection (see, e.g., Luke 11:20).

³ For the classic treatment of the subject, see Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1982).

“ordinarily.” But this term qualifies the doctrine in terms of what God may be pleased to do *apart* from his prescriptions to us, not what *we* may choose to do to vary from them.

The person who says, “I’m a member of the Kingdom of God, not organized religion” is inherently contradictory. How do we know that such a person is truly converted? For that matter, how does he or she know? They have refused Christ’s appointed administration of his Kingdom and, thus, stand apart from his kingship. For this reason, one cannot possess assurance of salvation indefinitely if he remains outside of the Church any more than if he persists in hardened resistance to Christ’s kingship. He may have saving faith, but have none of Christ’s means of assuring him of it. Paul wrote, “But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother” (Galatians 4:26, NASV). Hence, Cyprian wrote, “No one has God as his father without the Church as his mother.”⁴

To the extent we’ve been influenced by evangelicalism’s low view of the Church, we must give up our Lenny Bruce ecclesiology. Many of us unknowingly have adopted a viewpoint similar to classic twentieth-century liberalism. As Ridderbos described that view, “liberal theology asserted that, as a visible gathering of believers with a certain amount of organization, the Church lay entirely outside Jesus’ vision.”⁵ The only difference is that liberalism saw the visible Church exalted in the New Testament and accused the Church of adding it to Jesus’ teaching, whereas evangelicals simply don’t see it exalted at all.

Recovering the doctrine of the Church will change how we plant and promote our churches. As an ecclesial version of the Uncola 7-Up[®], many market their churches as the “unchurch,” church not like any church the seeker has known. A prominent congregation in a conservative, orthodox denomination once placed billboards by the interstate in their community stating, “Jesus hated church, too.” On the contrary, he loved her and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25-27). Just as, when a teenager, I was ashamed to be seen with my fifty-something parents, these evangelists are ashamed to be associated with the unhip mother of believers and wife of Christ.⁶ But returning to a biblical view of the Church and its primacy for life with God will help us in several specific ways.

First, it will reform the Gospel we preach. We will offer people the same good news Jesus offered them. The Great Commission is not just evangelism, it is the extension of Christ’s eternal Kingdom through the teaching and baptizing of the Church.

Second, we will urge professing people to unite with the Church to be sealed and nurtured so that they can rest upon God’s assurance, not upon a merely subjective, changeable, and unbiblical affection. We all know the word that describes a child born

⁴ For evidence of the antiquity and pervasiveness of this high view of the Church, see John R. Muether, “A Sixth Sola?” *Modern Reformation* (July/August 1998), 24-28.

⁵ *Coming of the Kingdom*, 335.

⁶ For a larger treatment of this subject, see my article, “An End to Generational Segregation in the Congregation,” *Modern Reformation*, (Jan./Feb. 2000), 28-33.

without a father. It's a cruel word, reflecting not upon the child, but upon the parents. We must stop commending to people the one parent family of God as Father, without the church as mother and its consequent bastardization of believers.

Third, we will be drawn back to doxological evangelism, where the people of God publicly demonstrate their rapt affections for their Redeemer in a way that draws the nations to the city which has foundations (Hebrews 11:10; cf. Psalm 67, Isaiah 2:2-3, 1 Corinthians 14:24-25). We will stop rending God by putting his glory and evangelism at odds.

Fourth, we will revive church discipline, both in its instructional and judicial senses. This least-practiced mark of the true Church is essential to giving meaning to church membership. This will include maintaining honest church rolls and redeeming membership numbers from its place as the most dubious statistic in Christendom.

Fifth, we will recover the means of grace — the Word, sacraments and prayer — as Christ's provision for our life with God (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 88-98). Our people will prize them for what they are — life-giving ordinances — and love Christ for giving them to the Church. This includes the faithful, frequent and public presentation of the visible Word — the sacraments — with table-fencing, which reminds one of the great gulf between the kingdom of this world and the next, and with exhortations to believers to improve their baptism. As a fellow minister once asked another who only had communion at a mid-week "believer's service," "Do you think it pleases our Lord that you hide his body and blood?"

Sixth, we will not give up evangelizing our members. We know there are tares among the wheat. While every believer needs the Gospel for sanctification, we will not forget that there are those members who have not yet received it for justification.

Finally, we will evidence the world-changing power that Christians are supposed to have. As Edmund Clowney has said:

The Church, however, as the community of Christ's Kingdom, can show the world an ethical integrity it must respect. When Peter describes (in I Peter 2:12) the impact of Christian righteous deeds in a pagan world, he is not thinking of isolated saints, but of the people of God, called out of darkness into God's light. Christian witness that is limited to private religious experience cannot challenge secularism."⁷

For true revival is not an individual experience, it is the revival of the Church of Christ. Not only does the Gospel need to include the Church to be the Gospel, but it is only in the Church where God will have the eternal glory for which the Gospel is proclaimed to the nations (Ephesians 3:20-21). A true evangelist must also be a true churchman. We spread the Kingdom only to the degree we extend the Church.

⁷ The Church (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1995), 16 (emphasis his).

[T]he kingdom began its coming when Jesus entered upon his public ministry. His work upon earth, including his death, was part of its realization. The disciples were in it, and the whole subsequent history of the Church is the history of its gradual extension. We ourselves can act our part in its onward movement and are members of it as a present organization.⁸

If we really love sinners, we will love Christ and vice versa. But to do both involves a third necessity — loving his Church, the Kingdom of Christ on earth.

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⁸ Geerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom of God and the Church* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 27.