

Total Christ Christianity ***The Church As An Essential Element of the Gospel***

Introduction:

Is the visible, organized, church an essential element of the gospel?

In this study we want to conduct a brief redemptive historical survey in scripture to conclude that there was never a time in all of redemptive history where Salvation did not involve the real, mediated presence of God in the midst of the people through the temple-church. This will impact the way we think about Christian Conversion, Christian ethics and Christian discipleship

From the Vantage point of Satan, it could be said that the healthy, gospel centered apostolic church is the Devil's most dangerous threat!

18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Mt. 16:18-19

Thus, Screwtape's Advice Considered (from C.S. Lewis, the Screwtape Letters)

"My dear Wormwood,

You mentioned casually in your last letter that the patient (Young Christian being tempted) has continued to attend one church, and one only, since he was converted, and that he is not wholly pleased with it. May I ask what you are about? Why have I no report on the causes of his fidelity to the parish church? Do you not realize that unless it is due to indifference it is a very bad thing? Surely you know that if a man can't be cured of church going, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighborhood looking for the church that 'suits' him until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches. Your affectionate uncle, SCREWTAPE

And Ancient Thesis:

Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (AD 250)

She is one mother, plentiful in the results of fruitfulness: from her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated . . . Whoever is separated from the Church . . . is separated from the promises to the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ . . . He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If any one could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the Church.¹

John Calvin

They therefore are insane who, neglecting this means, hope to be perfect in Christ, as is the case with fanatics, who pretend to secret revelations of the Spirit; and the proud who content themselves with the private reading of the Scripture, and imagine they do not need the ministry of the church. From her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated... Whoever is separated from the Church is separated from the promises to the Church. Nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ... Beyond the pale of the Church, no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for ... the paternal favor of God and the special evidence of

¹ Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, *On the Unity of the Church* (c. a.d. 250), emphasis added; available at www.philthompson.net/pages/library/unity.html (accessed Aug. 2004)

*spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal?*²

Westminster Confession of Faith

*The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.*³

Lesslie Newbigin

*Just as we insist that a Church which has ceased to be a mission has lost the essential character of a Church, so must we also say that a mission which is not at the same time truly a Church is not a true expression of the divine apostolate. An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary church.*⁴

I. Old Covenant Survey

- *Eden as Cosmic Temple Presence of God (Gen.1:1-2... Gen.1:27-28... Gen.3:8, 24,[Lev.23:3, Ex.26:1])*

That the whole of creation is meant to portray the building of holy temple of presence can be discerned by the use of such language as the repeated use of “dome” to describe the heavens, the same term used associated with Gods’ sanctuary in Psalms 150. Accordingly, Isaiah described God as a great architect-artist who created the world “not to be empty (of Himself)... but as a place to *live*” (Isa. 45:18). And clearly the effortless fiat character of the God’s work of creation prevents any misconception of the Creator’s Sabbath rest in Genesis 2:1-3 being that of a wearied workman! Rather, a better understanding would be to envision God in session, “seated” upon his throne in His royal creation-temple so as to be worshipped! This fits the image of Isaiah 66:1, where after identifying heaven and earth as God’s “throne-room” the same word “shabbath” for “rest” in Genesis 2 is repeated as to be synonymous with worship. And in Psalms. 132, God’s “resting place” is described as God’s “dwelling place” and the place where we are to worship him at his footstool.”

That the presence of the Spirit is intended to be a salvific presence, is indicated by its descent into a context that was “chaos and void.” This same is used to describe God’s curse upon the world awaiting salvation by Jeremiah 4:23ff! In Gen. 1:1-2, if we interpret the context of the “chaotic void” in light of what is to follow in vs. 3ff, together with prophetic application throughout scripture, the point is that pre-created reality not only lacked in cosmological order, but also a kingdom order!

In Genesis 1:27-28 the divine mandate given to “image of God” is to “fill the earth and subdue it.” This language is clearly priestly, as it is the same language applied to the role given to the cherubim with the flaming swords in Genesis 3:24 in order to guard the entrance back into the Edenic presence of God, and repeated again as to guard the entrance back into holy of holies in the temple (Ex.26:1).The curse that was enacted against fallen humanity is stated in terms of being excommunicated from out of the temple of God—as from “before the face of God (Gen.3:8, c.f.

² John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.4

³ Westminster Confession of Faith 20.2
Household of God, p. 147

Lev.23:3). And for what other purpose should we attribute to Genesis when it is carefully noted that humanity was driven from out of the east side of the garden, the very same direction facing the entrance to the Mosaic temple!

- *Bethel “household of God” (Gen.12:9, 28:16-18, 31:13)*

We can say therefore that creation set into motion a redemptive history of subsequent new creations—all related to the ministry of Word as initiated by the descent of the Holy Spirit within a temple context! To read the Bible is to read about the advent of God in salvation, albeit mediated through God’s Holy Temple *presence*! It is one and the same history concerning God’s sacramental presence that will continue through the Patriarchal Era by means of God’s presence mediated at Bethel (the “house of God”). During this context of redemptive history, Jacob will exclaim, “Surely the LORD is in *this place*” and “how awesome is *this place*! This is none other than the house of God, even *the gate of heaven*.”⁵ Perhaps even more astounding is the fact that God condescends to identify Himself with His sacramental presence on earth when He proclaims “I am the God of Bethel” (Gen.31:13). As a result, God directed His people to Bethel for the purpose of finding salvation by means of covenant execution and renewal according to Genesis.35:1ff.

- *Moses and Institution of Temple church (Psm. 46, c.f. Gen.15, 26:24, Ex. 29:42, Dt. 12:5. Lev. 22:3,*

Under the MOsaic Covenant context, Psalms 46 proclaimed that the “refuge and strength” of God is “a very *present* help in times of trouble—when “mountains seem to shake... and the waters roar and foam.” We are reminded then of a salvation, in classic poetic prose, that is accomplished by God’s *presence*! And lest we misread the psalmist on this point, the sort of divine *presence* extolled was not a mere individualized or democratized *presence*. It was not even a universalized or omnipresent kind of *presence* of God. Rather, it was the sort of *presence* mediated in “the holy place of the tabernacle of the most high, where God is *in the midst of her*” so that “she shall not be moved.”⁶ Indeed, true spirituality in the Old Testament was experienced with such words as “dwelling place” and “tabernacle,” even as covenants were initiated and sealed through rites whereby God manifested his presence to his people.⁷

E.g In the Mosaic covenant, John Durham has noted concerning the book of Exodus how “the centerpiece of its theological unity is the theology of Yahweh present with and in the midst of his people Israel!”⁸ It is therefore no surprise that when the people wanted to sing songs of praise concerning the blessed salvation of God in celebration of the exodus event, and their subsequent conquest and settlement of Canaan, that what they sang about over and over again was God’s presence.⁹

Summary of OT:

The Bible is not 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

⁵ c.f. Abraham and Bethel in Gen. 12:8, Jacob and Bethel in Gen. 28:16-18

· The NRSV reads “holy habitation,” The NASV reads “holy dwelling place.” The Hebrew word is *yānV;kVvIm*, the same word for “tabernacle” used in Exodus 24-27 and the word that is almost exclusively used in the Old Testament concerning the visible dwelling place of God.

· c.f. Gen.15, 26:24, Ex. 29:42, Dt. 12:5. Lev. 22:3, Ps.76.2, Pss 76:2, Num.35:34.

· John Durham, “Exodus”, *Word Biblical Commentary* Vol 3 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987) p. xxi

· Ex.15:11ff.

II. NC Survey

- John 1:14, 31-32... 6:56... 14-20...

John's gospel is careful to frame Christ as the coming of the temple in John 1:14. Each of Christ's "I Am" statements throughout John's gospel are carefully presented in the context of temple feasts as to say "Jesus IS the temple reality in the flesh.

More specifically, In the first chapter of John there is a close integration of John's ministry of baptizing Christ by water (vs.31), Jesus's own reception of the Spirit (vs. 32) and the promise that Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit (vs. 33). These historical realities anticipate Christ's teachings in John 14-17 concerning His coming again *in the Holy Spirit*—a clear reference to Pentecost and the ensuing temple formation built upon the foundation of the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone.

So for instance, in John 14-16 Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit as yet "another" counselor and comforter. The point being made in 14:12ff especially is that the gift of the Holy Spirit is conditioned upon both His going to the Father (ascent) and at the same time his coming back to them (descent) (c.f. Eph 4). Very carefully, Jesus says "I will not leave you orphaned; *I am coming to you*. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (vs. 18-20). Christ further speaks of making his "home with them" (vs. 23). And then immediately he says, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you (vs. 25-26).

- Acts 1:5... Acts 2:41-42... Acts 9:31

It is therefore not surprising that when Peter is asked to explain the meaning of Pentecost, he doesn't preach the "Holy Spirit," rather he preaches "Christ." "Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-39 is basically Christ centered, even as it results in church formation! For the result of Pentecost was not merely individual conversions, but the presence of God in Word, Sacraments and Order as noted in Acts 2, where it is said that Christ was proclaimed such that those who "received" the message "were baptized" even as they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:41-42). Indeed, Luke's summary of the apostles' ministry throughout Acts is stated in terms of church formation. Paul, for instance, made it his business to appoint elders wherever he went demonstrating that the ultimate object of his labors was new churches (Acts 14:23). And while we clearly see preaching as one of the means used by the apostles in Acts, we come to this striking observation in Acts 9:31: "then the *churches* throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified." In other words, as summary to the work of the apostles, what we see is that church planting had been co-extensive with preaching.

- 1 Cor.3:16... 2Cor.6:16

In other words, apart from the church, we do not have full access to Christ by means of His coming of the Holy Spirit. The gospel according to Paul is not a

¹⁰ Leslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, (NY, NY: Harper & Row, 1948)p. 27, 29

transition from temple to “no temple” as some would have it. In this regard, Paul's teaching for us under the New Covenant is no different than the prophetic teaching under the Old Covenant, that salvation is described with the promise "I will dwell with them" (2 Cor. 6:16). This is also Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 3, even as Richard Hayes has observed,

Paul dares to assert [that] the community is the place where God dwells. "Do you not know," he asks, "that you [plural] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you [plural]?" (3:16). To read this last sentence as though it spoke of the Spirit dwelling in the body of the individual Christian would be to miss the force of Paul's audacious metaphor: the apostolically founded community takes the place of the Jerusalem temple as the place where the glory of God resides.¹¹

III. Eph 2:11-21

- Eph. 1:22-23 (c.f. John 20:21)

It should be noted as well that this whole idea of the church as an essential element of the gospel is clearly revealed in Ephesians. Paul starts off in Ephesians 1 by saying that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in the salvation of fallen humanity to the “praise of God's glorious grace.” And not by accident, this whole doxology culminates with the ascended ministry of Christ directly related to being “marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit” as then to conclude with Christ being made **head over all things for the church**, which is *his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all* (Eph. 1:22-23).

Exegetical Observations

- *Fill all things in 2*

Temple language

OT: “filling” reference to shikanah glory in temple (glory fills the temple)

Ex. 40:34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD **filled** the tabernacle. **35** Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD **filled** the tabernacle.

Eph.-- Note for instance

1:22 *And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, **23** which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

2:20 *built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. **21** In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; **22** in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*

- **Ephesians 2:11ff**

Exegetical Observation:

- *Once... but now* (x2)

That the ministry of the Holy Spirit is BOTH individual and corporate in reality can be discerned as well in the very carefully crafted argument of Ephesians 2. For beginning in Ephesians 2:1, Paul will utilize a “once... but now” literary framework to describe the work of the Holy Spirit in personal salvation.¹² And yet, all too often, this is where we stop reading. We should therefore be careful to notice how the “once... but now” framework is explicitly repeated by Paul beginning in vs. 11, and completed in vs. 21.¹³ The repetition speaks

¹¹ Richard B. Hayes, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in 1 Corinthians*, (located on the web.) N.p.

¹² ποτε (vs. 2ff)... δὲ (vs. 4ff)

¹³ ποτε...νῦν (vs. 11ff)... νῦν δὲ (vs. 13ff)

volumes—as to say in bold terms, “this is still about the gospel!” This time, the emphasis is corporate, about a people once estranged from God by means of being alienated from the corporate *presence* of God!

- *Household of God...* (vs. 20... cf. 4:16)
Clearly from this passage, to be separated from the “household of God” (vs. 19) is NOT to participate in the gospel according to vs. 18 where it is said, “for through Him (Christ) we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.” (E.g. No church... no access to God!) In this second section concerning the gospel, the work of the Holy Spirit is attributed to our being “in Him (Christ) related to being in the “holy temple” that is “*in the Lord!*” The language is graphic.
- *tabernacle of God* (vs. 22... c.f. Psm.46:4, etc)
According then to Ephesians, Paul makes the case for the gospel that assumes the church “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” And notice especially that Paul explicitly references a “structure” that is being “*joined together*” such as to grow into a holy temple in the Lord,” even that which is “in Christ” being “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:20ff). E.g. Christ’s advent in the Holy Spirit acting in, through and with the *visible* Church! This is even more clear when it is further observed how this language of “being joined together” is used again in Ephesians 4:16 concerning the descent of Christ in the Holy Spirit related to the institution of the apostolic and then post apostolic offices! Their purpose was again to “join together” the body of Christ— probably a reference to their role of “organizing” churches.¹⁴ As constructed then upon the apostolic foundation, one can at the very least conclude that the construction of an assembly included instructions in “doctrine, sacrament and government all of which was related to the “building of the temple.”

- **Eph. 4:7**

We should notice here the ascend... descend (and in that order) as related to “filling all things” that was earlier related to the meaning and purpose of the temple-church on earth as Christ is in heaven.

We should also notice the language in vs. 12ff that is all about church planting basically!

12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13** until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. **14** We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. **15** But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, **16** from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in

Exegetical Observation:

- *Building up:*

In vs. 22 a kind of “union in Christ” is synonymous with “being built up *together* spiritually into a *dwelling place* of God.” One ought not to pass over this word “together”, as it assumes an assembly or “ekklesia.” Nor should we miss the significance of the phrase “dwelling place,” as it is one and the same word used in the Greek Old Testament for “tabernacle” such as in Psalms 46 vs. 4!

¹⁴ συναρμολογουμένη, see also Ephesians 4:16. According then to Louw and Nida, this word can be used synonymously with “assemble,” arrange, structure or even “organize.” In 1Cor.12:20 for instance, God is said to “structure (συγκεράννυμι) the body of Christ as to give some greater honor than others.. And perhaps most significantly, Titus 1:5 applies the verb ἐπιδιορθόω to mean “set in order” or even “organize” as to establish a church by means of the training and appointment of elders. Louw & Nida, #62.3,4,5. C.f. T. David Gordon’s “Equipping” Ministry in Ephesians 4?”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March, 1994).

- *Joined and knit together:*

The word "joined" can be used synonymously with "assemble," arrange, structure or even "organize." In 1Cor.12:20 for instance, God is said to "structure) the body of Christ as to give some greater honor than others.. And perhaps most significantly, Titus 1:5 applies the verb to mean "set in order" or even "organize" as to establish a church by means of the training and appointment of elders.

Paul explicitly references a "structure" that is being "*joined together*" such as to grow into a holy temple in the Lord," even that which is "in Christ" being "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Eph. 2:20ff). And then it is observed how this same language of "being joined together" is used again in Ephesians 4:16, this time as related to the descent of Christ in the Holy Spirit as applied to the post apostolic offices!

- **1 Timothy 3** ""the pillar and bulwark of the truth"

The "pattern of sound words" related to Paul's instructions to his young protégé, Timothy is stated "in order that" he might "know how *one ought* to conduct oneself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14-15). And would it surprise us that Paul's "instructions" to Timothy covered such topics as instructions on ordination (1 Tim 3), worship (1Tim 2) and doctrine (1Tim 1) as no doubt being worked out in an assembled context? Surely then, the "whole structure" (doctrine, worship, governed fellowship/pastoral care) is being "joined together" upon the apostolic foundation spoken of in Ephesians included such things! And as such, the "temple" being spoken of in Ephesians is both "spiritual" as to be animated into Christ by the Holy Spirit AND organized as to take on a definable and even "orthodox" form

Conclusion: The *Missional* Church as An Essential Element of the Gospel

'The catholic or universal Church... gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof... is... the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all. 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. __WCF 25.1-2

Under the New Covenant, this conception of "tabernacle" is mediated through different corporate structures related to the activity of the Holy Spirit for the church. Paul teaches that "we are the temple of God" and immediately applies the promises and exhortations once given to the Old Covenant church to the New Covenant church (2 Cor. 6:16-18, see then Exek. 37:26, Is. 52:11, 2 Sam. 7:14.). Paul's teaching for us under the New Covenant was no different than the prophetic teaching under the Old Covenant, that salvation is described with the promise " I will dwell with them" (2 Cor. 6:16). This "dwelling" after the fall and before heaven always included some mediated structure whereby God, in a provisional way, was present to effect his saving activity. And according to Revelation 21, we are to see all this earlier history as climaxed in the return of Christ!

Beyond the pale of the Church, no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for ... the paternal favor of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal?¹⁵

"In the Church, Christ carries forward, his divine human life through its proclamation of God's word and its administration of the sacraments, continuing evermore to visit his little flock, assembled with one accord for prayer, with the fullness of light and life by His Holy Spirit." Phillip Shaft

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.4

The church is not the source of witness, it is the locus of witness.... The presence of a new reality, the presence in the shared life of the church of the spirit who is the harbinger of the kingdom, has become possible because of what Jesus has done, because of his incarnation, his ministry as the obedient child of his father, his suffering and death, his resurrection, AND his ascension into heaven and his session at the right hand of God... Its visible embodiment will be a community that lives by this story, a community whose existence is visibly defined in the regular rehearsing and reenactment of the story which has given it birth, the story of the self-emptying of God in the ministry of life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Its visible center as a continuing social entity is that weekly repeated event in which believers share bread and wine as Jesus commanded, as his pledge to them and their pledge to him that they are one with him in his passion and one with him in his victory...¹⁶

Implications in Ministry in Total Christ Christianity

1) The Church Essential Element of Christian Conversion

- The Importance of Baptism and Full membership into the church for Conversion to be Complete (i.e. baptism doesn't save us, only faith in Christ alone, but it ordinarily IS a means toward being saved and being fully united to Christ as Christ is visibly mediated through the church)

Mt. 28: 16-20, *go therefore, make disciples of all nations, by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and by teaching them to obey/believe all that I have commanded you.*

DID we really hear Christ right, that for a person to become a Christian, they must not only "believe" the teachings concerning Christ and the gospel, but they must participate in this ancient ritual of Christian Baptism.

Note also:

Acts 2:38-39, *Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy spirit. For this promise is for you, for your children after you. and for all that are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call unto himself*

Now briefly, we should stop and think about all this for a moment.

1. We know from Mt. 28 and elsewhere that Baptism is NOT a human institution or idea, but A divine institution and God's idea as here ordinarily related to becoming a Christian even!! IT MUCH ACCOMPLISH SOMETHING IMPORTANT!!
- 2.
3. We know that baptism as a "sign/symbol" represents the gospel, pure and simple. How so? Water is a sign that signifies BOTH "death" and "Birth"—I'm not making this up, this is exactly how Peter explains it for instance:

Water/Death-- a "drowning" ceremony likened by Peter to the waters of the flood and Red Sea! (1 Peter 3:18-22, 2 Peter 3:5-7)—Baptism warns us that concerning the coming of a great judgment ordeal of which all must pass. For those outside of the faith of Noah and Israel respectively, these waters enacted God's terrible curse and condemnation.

¹⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Ch. 10, p. 120

Water/Rebirth—And yet for Noah’s family and Israel—the same waters that brought judgment upon those outside of God’s covenant grace, brought new birth and life giving salvation!

1Pet. 3:21 *And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you--not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ*

Titus 3:5 *He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.*

3. More than a sign/symbol that teaches us something—it is a efficacious power!! Again, there is a “spiritual relation between the thing signified and the sign”—that is it IS a means/instrument in the hand of God that is used to actually transact the gospel to us. By means of uniting (engrafting us) to Christ himself!!! I.e. in a mystical way, we “partake” of God and the power of the gospel in so far as we are baptized, at least ordinarily as to make room for the exceptions within God’s sovereign election--...

The function and purpose of Baptism as a sacrament is as follows (from WCF)

It is:

- “Immediate Institution” -- specially instituted by divine law.
- “holy Sign”—i.e. by way of a symbol/sign—it teaches us something
- “holy... Seal”—i.e. by way of its power- it actually accomplished something—again, using the words of our own ecclesiastical consensus—
- There is a
“Spiritual Relation . . . between the thing signified and the sign” or means of grace

Related to Baptism then, we are said to be

engrafted

into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Thus, WCF 28.6

Again, as according to Titus, we are saved as through the *water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*. – no one doubts this is a clear reference to the waters of baptism, even as Christ related the baptism of the Holy Spirit to the baptism in water in John 3.

OK, SO HERE IS THE DEAL—the gospel is more than a rational response to a message, it is a participation in union with God! Baptism is the means wherein god accomplishes this, ordinarily. Baptism effects this union, not as the agent itself—there is no power in the water per se—but as an instrument in the hands of the holy spirit.

Note Also Early Church Revisited

Pagan converts to the [Christian] mainstream did not, for the most part, first understand the faith and then decide to become Christians; rather, the process was reversed: they first decided and then they understood. More precisely, they were first attracted by the Christian community and form of life... they submitted themselves to prolonged catechetical instruction in which they practiced new modes of behavior and learned the stories of Israel and their fulfillment in Christ. Only after they had acquired proficiency in the alien

*Christian language and form of life were they deemed able intelligently and responsibly to profess the faith, to be baptized.*¹⁷

- Augustine's Confessions revisited
*We were baptized, and all anxiety as to our past life fled away.*¹⁸

IN THE CASE OF A CHILD

When a child is baptized into the visible Union with Christ in/with/through the church, it is not then to necessarily resolve his or her ultimate destiny with God necessarily, nor is it to necessarily bring regeneration to the child immediately, but it is to bring the child into that place where he or she will be nurtured in the very womb of God.. Baptism, more than a sign of what we believe, is a real means of grace wherein God is not just witness, but present to actually confer his grace through it, although not necessarily, and not necessarily immediately, as it is always ultimately determined by God's sovereign election.

2) The Importance of Church Membership For Total Christ Christianity

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 since 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 experience 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) This 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).

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

¹⁷ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 132c.f. c.f. Above redemptive historical survey and especially the story of the early church in Act 2:1-47, note especially vs. 44-47, and then a more theological discourse about the relation of faith to participation in the life of God in, with and through the "temple" of the New Testament church in Ephesians 2:1- 22.

¹⁸ Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Random House, 2001), 9.6.

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 self effort as a basis for relating to God, and by implication, turn to Christ’s efforts and receive him as your savior) 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)

IT is therefore a matter of Christian discipleship that we become members of the visible church of which the means of God's grace, in the preaching, sacraments and discipline of the church are made affective toward conversion and spiritual growth. And God remains, able in a provisional way, "with us" through his mediated ministries as our prophet priest and king.

So are their commands in scripture that require church members—YES!

One aspect of a *credible* profession of faith is that the person be committed to obeying the commands of God in the New Covenant—many of which presuppose a formal relation to the visible church-- membership in the church is essential to a credible profession of faith. That is, if a command is given in scripture that would be virtually impossible to keep without church membership, then the good and necessary inference from scripture must be that scripture requires some form of an accountable commitment to the visible church. (Call it what you may, we call it church membership.) Two examples of what I mean can be summarized as follows:

A. The responsibilities of the church-governors for the flock

Heb. 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, *for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account.* Let them do this with joy and not with sighing--for that would be harmful to you.

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves *and over all the flock*, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. 29 I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. 31 Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears.

1 Peter 5:1-3, I exhort the elders among you *to tend the flock of god that is in your charge*, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it...

How could the church officers (i.e. elders and pastors) practically be faithful to the above commands unless there is some definable "flock... under your charge?" In other words, how can a conscientious shepherd watch over a flock that he couldn't define in terms of membership? And how can officers know whether or not a person or family desires to be a recipient of this pastoral oversight unless they give some verbal profession to that effect? Call it what you want, membership, verbal commitment, etc.-without it, there would be no way to keep the above commands, thus making God's word nonsensical and absurd.

B. The responsibilities of the flock to the church-governors

Heb. 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, *for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account.* Let them do this with joy and not with sighing--for that

would be harmful to you.

1Tim. 5:17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching;

How would the flock of God practically keep the above commands without a definable and visible group of leaders. Certainly these passages are not saying that it is necessary to "obey" and "submit" to every self-appointed leader of every Christian organization. Therefore, by necessary inference, these passages imply that a person is committed to some definable society with a definable number of leaders. Otherwise, the command is meaningless with no real practical implications.

From these passages, in order for a person to have a credible profession of faith, he/she would need to be in some formal relation to some authorized church government in order to keep the above commands. Moreover, these commands render the visible church, as consisting of some lawful government, an essential element for Christian discipleship.

What Does it Look Like to Be A Member of A Church?

Member Responsibilities:

1: Regular Attendance

All members are expected to be faithful and regular in their participation in Lord's Day worship unless providentially hindered; we believe this to be a *duty*, not an *option*. With regard to other church activities (such as Sunday school, small groups, and men's and women's groups), members are *strongly encouraged* to take advantage of such opportunities in an effort to grow in God's grace and build up the body of Christ. (Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:24-25).

2. Service

Every member of this church has been placed here by God, not only to receive ministry, but also to render service to the body of Christ. Therefore it is important for every member, with the help and guidance of the Church, to diligently search for opportunities to serve in the body of Christ. (Ephesians 4:7,16, Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7).

3. Promotion of Edification and Peace

We are many members but one body, and thus we should all strive for the health and peace of that body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:4, 11-16). Members therefore ought actively to cultivate relationships with one another so that they may be better able to pray for one another; to love, comfort and encourage one another; to bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances they may have against one another; and to help one another materially as occasion may require. Members ought to be careful to season their speech with grace such that the body of Christ is built up in peace. If one member notices another in sin, that member ought to follow the instructions of Matthew 18:15-20, namely to go to that person in private having said nothing to anyone else. If this fails, take another member, preferably an elder, to talk with the person. This failing, the issue ought to be brought to the attention of the session of elders (representing the whole church) for further instruction and discipline.

4. Systematic and Proportionate Support

It is clearly taught in Scripture that it is the duty and privilege of all Christians to support the work of the church with whatever resources you have and can give cheerfully as unto the Lord to the work of the church. Your resources include financial support as you have it, but it doesn't just include financial support. It should also be in the form of time and tangible/intangible service to the church. The key is that God proportion some with more money, others with more time, etc. You give what you can of what you have and somewhat else will give what they can and all together God sustains his church—as those who have too much of one thing don't have too much, those who have too little of one thing end up not having too little, because in our mutual service one to another it all equals out. (1 Cor 8) Some have more while others have less. Members should be committed to regular, proportional, significant, and sacrificial giving to the Lord's work. No precise amount or percentage has been prescribed under the New Covenant. We should all be seeking to grow in the grace of giving and to demonstrate our commitment to Christ and his Kingdom in this most tangible and measurable way.

(1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9)

5. Support of and Submission to Leadership

All who join this Church are expected to support and submit to the authority of the elders of the Church. Supporting the elders involves respecting them (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13); praying for them and their shepherding labors (Ephesians 6:18-20); and not entertaining false accusations against them (1 Timothy 5:19). Submitting to the elders entails heeding their teaching of and counsel from the Scriptures as those appointed to watch over the souls of Christ's flock (Acts 20:28, Colossians 1:28; 1 Timothy 3:5-Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4)

6. Prayer

Members ought to pray regularly for the church – namely that Christ may be glorified through the making of the disciples by the preaching, teaching and administration of the sacraments in a mission for the glory of God and the grace of the Gospel throughout the world.