



## WHY DO AMERICAN CHRISTIANS DESPISE THE CHURCH?

**O**r maybe we could ask another question: Why do Americans despise the Christian Church? Do either of these sound like fair questions?

To help us get a handle on the topic we should remind ourselves of how the Scriptures define the Church.

Romans 12:3-5

1 Corinthians 10:31-33

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Ephesians 1:18-23

Ephesians 5:25-32

Colossians 1:17-20

Colossians 3:14-16

Ephesians 2:19-22

The Church is the Body of Christ. It is an organization with form, content, officers, assets (through tithes and offerings), rules that govern it members (the commandments of Christ), rituals (baptism, worship, the Lord's Supper), etc. But it is more than merely an organization, it is a living organism, for those belonging to the Church are called by the Holy Spirit into a living, covenantal relationship of union with Jesus Christ, Who has reconciled us to our Father in heaven. Each of the

members of the Church is connected in a special way to one another; we are joined to each member, not by a natural blood relationship, but by water and blood...baptism and the cross. This new family of God is the primary family, and the most important institution that God has ordained.

We have lately mentioned the Great Commission given to the Church. We saw that the task there is discipling the nations, which is more than getting a few people "saved". Last week we presented the biblical case for Christian optimism concerning the future success of the Gospel. We saw that a pessimistic theology of the future is not in keeping with the fact of the Lord Jesus Christ's present reign...He will indeed put all His enemies under His feet before the Day of Resurrection. And how is this done? By the Church preaching, teaching, discipling, and living out the implications of the Gospel in every area of life. In this way "the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" By the way, where is this quote from?

There are, in God's design for this world, three institutions ordained by

Him, each with its own sphere of authority and responsibility: the family, the civil government, and the Church. We don't have to draw these circles of authority as being completely separate, but rather as intersecting circles, with common goals and functions. For instance, parents are primarily responsible for the education of their children, but the Church also has an interest here, to see that all its members are "nurtured in the fear and admonition of the Lord." And further, the state does have interest (limited!) in an educated people, since their concern is justice, the common good, and a peaceful society.

As Americans, we might view this arrangement like we do the three branches of civil government in our country: separation of powers, resulting in a balance of power. But that is not how we are to view the situation. Rev. Rich Lusk points out:

Sphere sovereignty all too easily gives the impression that each of these institutions are of equal value, as though the church was just one institution among many under Christ's lordship. Because all spheres are open to kingdom influence and activity, the kingdom itself is viewed as the aggregate of

Christian cultural involvement. In reality, however, the church is the central sphere, since, if for no other reason, it is responsible for the discipling of the other spheres. In and through the church, kingdom principles invade and shape the other spheres. In this sense, other spheres are under the authority and care of the church and in turn are to serve and promote the church. This view seems to be well grounded in biblical principles. Paul tells us that Christ rules over all things for the sake of his church (Eph. 1:22-23). Of course, since the church is his body and bride, this is just how things should be. The church is the first form of Christian culture and therefore takes primacy.

When we speak of the centrality of the church, we have in view the church specifically as an institution, constituted by Word, sacraments, and government. Some have suggested that the church as an institution is relatively unimportant; what really matters is the organic body of the people of God. But this is a false dichotomy. The institutional church is itself a living organism, not a dead organization. One of Paul's points in Eph. 4:1-16 is that the ministry is not a tacked on "extra"; rather it is inherent in the living constitution of the body of Christ itself. It flows from the new

order ordained and inaugurated by the ascension of Christ into heaven and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Christ himself gave existence to the ministry at the same time that he gave existence to the church (cf. Mt. 28:18ff). As Nevin argued, church and ministry “spring from the same source and from the same time.”

Moreover, how did the people of God, generically considered, come to be the people of God in the first place? How are they identified as a visible community in the world? As a culture (or counter-culture) within the mass of fallen cultures? Which comes first (logically and chronologically) – the church as an institution, with structure and organization, or the people of God, individually considered? The biblical answer is clear. Only through the ministries of the institutional church are the people of God constituted as such. It’s not simply having Christian ideas floating around in one’s head that makes one a Christian; it’s joining the institutional body of Christ and remaining in her fold by way of Word and sacrament that one becomes and remains a Christian. It’s professing one faith and submitting to one baptism and celebrating one supper that makes us an

identifiable people among all the peoples of the world.

Now here is where Americans have a problem. We do not like the Church as an institution, we’re anti-institutional to the core, and hyper-individualistic! American Christians may think churches are nice, but not necessary. We think that we can have a “personal relationship” with Jesus apart from the Church, that churchy stuff is a take it or leave it thing.

But the Bible speaks otherwise, for the Church is the “pillar and ground of the truth”; the Church is our “Mother”, without whom we cannot have life. By the God-ordained means of ministry through Word, Sacrament, and fellowship, the Church is the very heart and soul of the Kingdom of Christ. Pastor Lusk again:

The church, therefore, must be understood as the nursery of the kingdom, as it it nurtures and equips us to serve God in all facets of life. The kingdom grows out of the matrix of the institutional church, with its various ministries, the means of grace, and so forth. In an unfallen world, church, family, and state would have all worked together in the common project of

growing the kingdom of God. The Garden of Eden would have progressed into the New Jerusalem quite organically. But in a fallen world, men build their own kingdoms (or Satan's kingdom), and they often use the family and state to do so. Virtually all false religions exalt either the family or state to virtual godhood. Think of the ancient divinization of the Roman emperors and Egyptian pharaohs, and in more modern times, Hegel's depiction of the state as "God on earth." Or, consider the divinization of the family in tribal religions and in cults like Mormonism. False religions do not so much create a counterfeit church, as they make the family or state into a rival of the church.

It is this dynamic, especially as it has played itself out in contemporary American culture, that we want to explore. As already stated, American Christians have been vulnerable to the temptation of putting both political and familial ties above the church. Yet, our highest loyalty is to Jesus Christ and his people. This loyalty to the church (conceived of as totus Christus, body and head) qualifies and relativizes all other loyalties. The natural family and the state are important, but secondary institutions.

So why do Americans, Christian or otherwise, despise the Church? Because, ultimately, we want our own way. Of course, unbelievers have their own gods and don't want the Church of Jesus Christ telling them what to believe and how to live. American Christians don't want the Church according to the Bible's definition, because they have bought into numerous errors:

- ❖ Dispensationalism and its pessimistic view of the future.
- ❖ Autonomous individualism...don't tell me what to do.
- ❖ "Blood is thicker than water"
- ❖ "It's just me and Jesus"
- ❖ The OT is physical stuff, the NT is spiritual stuff.

To be continued.....

