

“NO SALVATION OUTSIDE THE CHURCH.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

April 16, 2014, 6:00PM

Sermon Texts: Hebrews 10:24-25

Belgic Confession Article 28

Introduction:

Our text in Hebrews was written sometime in the late first century. The Church has only a few decades old and already people were neglecting her.

From the very beginning there have been those who have thought negatively about the church and about the necessity of being a part of a church.

Today is no different. There is no lack of those who hold the church in disdain, and feel free to criticize or attack her. And unfortunately there are many grounds for criticizing the church today. Scandals abound, money, sex, power, meddling in politics, strife and conflict.

But it's not just the stuff that makes the headlines. There are the petty complaints we all have heard.

The church is too old, too irrelevant, too stuck in her ways, or out of touch.

The church is too cold, too unfriendly, too cliquish.

The pastor is too loud or too boring or too hard to understand.

Or the classic, the church is too full of hypocrites.

So the conclusion of many is that they don't need the church, because they have a personal relationship with Jesus. They find God in nature, on the golf course or at the mall.

All of this says that we come to the church with a list of expectations or demands; what it needs to measure up to our criteria. This is a byproduct of looking at the church as a human institution, of looking at the church with the eyes of sight and not the eyes of faith.

As a human institution the church is filled with sinners and completely stained with sin. But that is not the only perspective or even the best perspective to have of the church. It's not all about us.

The Church of Jesus Christ is built entirely by Jesus Christ and on Jesus Christ. He is the foundation and the corner stone.

The Reformers in the time of the Reformation were being accused of tearing down the church and encouraging people to leave the church. Article 28 of the Belgic Confession was written to state just the opposite.

Article 28.

Article 28 of the Belgic Confession begins with a very startling statement.

“There is no salvation apart from [the church].”

These famous words were first spoken by the early church father Cyprian in the third century. They were repeated by Calvin and then by Guido de Bres in our confession.

It reminds me of another wise old saint who put it even more strongly, “He who will not have the church as his mother may not have God as his Father.”

What does that mean that outside the church there is no salvation? Does it mean that we are saved by the church?

We all know our Bibles well enough to affirm salvation is found in Christ and in no one else. So the confession is not saying that the church is what saves us.

Article 28 gives the reason for saying what it says. It defines the church as a holy congregation, as the assembly of those who are saved, the communion of saints. To be in Christ is to be in His body. Christ and His body are one.

God is a covenant making God, and to say there is no salvation outside the church is to acknowledge there is no salvation outside of God’s covenant. In the OT there was no salvation outside of Israel. Israel was the people of God, there was no other people of God.

Jesus saves individual sinners, but He does so through His church and He does so in order to bring them into His church. You can’t have Christ’s head without Christ’s body.

The Church is where the voice of the Good Shepherd is heard.

The Church is where the Word of God is preached.

The Church is where Christ gave the keys of the kingdom.

The Church is where those who are being saved are added.

Where Christ is, there is the church.
Where the church is, there is Christ.

To be a Christian means to have fellowship and communion with Christ.
To be a Christian means to have fellowship and communion with Christ's people.

There is no other way to be a Christian than to be a part of Christ's church.
To deny the necessity of the church is to deny the necessity of Jesus.

This is what it means when it says outside of the church there is no other salvation.
This is what it means when it says, "He who will not have the church as his mother may not have God as his Father."

The Biblical vision of the glory of the Church of Jesus Christ.

People who look at the church as a human institution full of sinners are looking with the eyes of sight, and not with the eyes of faith. They see a group of people stained by sin, they don't see that stain covered by the stain of Jesus' blood.

Let me give you a different perspective on this little gathering house on Front Street and on any other gathering house you might happen to drive by that's faithful to the Word.

This is not a human institution or club, this is not just another fraternal organization, this is the blood-bought body of Jesus Christ, the holy assemblage of those who are saved.

This is a place of sacred worship offered to the eternal, living God of the universe.
This is Christ's church, it belongs, body and soul to Him and Him alone.

This is the church Christ loves, the church He gave Himself up for and laid down His life for (Ephesians 5:25).

This is the church He has sent His Holy Spirit to fill it with His grace and His fruit and His gifts.

This is the church He has given His Word to, entrusting her to be the pillar and foundation of the truth (I Timothy 3:15).

This is the church He has given the true doctrines to maintain by rightly dividing the Word.

You want to know one way to see how great and precious the church is? Look in the Scripture and see how many names the church is known by. There are over one hundred names given to describe the church.

| | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| The body of Christ | The bride of Christ |
| The temple of God | The people of God |
| The household of God | The sheepfold of |
| God/Christ | |
| The priesthood of all believers | The holy city |
| A chosen race | A holy nation |
| The vineyard of God | An olive tree |
| God's planting | God's building |
| Living stones | The elect |
| The remnant | The Lord's army |
| God's new creation | God's new humanity |

And the list goes on and on. So many metaphors and descriptions helping us appreciate the richness and multifaceted nature of the church and the privilege that's ours to be a part of so great a gift of God.

If we saw each assembly of faithful saints as God sees her we would esteem her with our highest praise.

Our duty and obligation.

This understanding of the church leads us to consider our duties and obligations toward her. This is not a casual, take it or leave it, organization.

Article 28 lists five duties of membership:

Joining and uniting.

We are duty bound as followers of Jesus Christ to join His church, to unite ourselves to Christ's body, to be a part of it, to love it and support it. We don't just belong to Christ, we belong to each other.

The metaphors for the church all picture a joining and uniting, that's not just individual but corporate:

- Shepherd and sheep
- Vine and branches
- Temple and stones
- Body and members of that body

Maintaining (keeping) the unity.

We bring our sinful selves into any church we join, so we must constantly guard our tongues to keep from causing offenses or becoming a stumbling block. We have to be self-controlled and disciplined.

One of the remarkable things about the Mexico Mission trip was how well everyone got along. Twenty three people of diverse ages, interests and backgrounds working together in close quarters, sharing bedrooms and bathrooms and everyone behaving in a Christ-like, mature manner.

To maintain unity in the body takes hard work, especially to discipline ourselves and die to ourselves and our selfish desires. We have to come more to give than to receive. Participating actively in keeping the peace and unity, not distant and aloof.

Romans 12:18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Submitting to her doctrine and discipline.

We are duty bound as followers of Jesus Christ to submit to the doctrine of Christ's church as expressed in the creeds and confessions of the church. It's all of our duty to keep the bride of Christ free from error, from wolves in sheep's clothing.

We are duty bound as followers of Jesus Christ to submit ourselves to its discipline, its authority.

We are to strive to grow in grace and knowledge. We are to grow in spiritual wisdom and maturity. The church is to be our mother who disciplines us and corrects us and teaches us and trains us in righteousness.

Bowing to the yoke of Jesus.

We are duty bound to bow under the yoke of Christ.

Matthew 11:29-30 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Christ must be central and any church that puts anything ahead of Christ is false.

Serving according to our gifts.

We are duty bound as followers of Jesus Christ to serve His church, to seek to edify it and build it up and strengthen it with whatever gifts, abilities and talents He has given to us.

HC Q.55. WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND BY "THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS"?

A. First, that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it a duty to use these gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and enrichment of the other members.

We are never to live isolated from Christ's body or isolated in Christ's body. Each of us is as important and necessary to this spiritual body as our heart or liver or lungs are to our physical body.

I know the question arises, is all of this true about every individual church or denomination. We will address that in Article 29 that teaches us our duty to prayerfully and diligently discern what a true church is and what the marks of a true church are.

Application and conclusion.

Some years ago I was in a conversation with someone who had some criticisms of our church. I listened because I know we're not perfect and we can benefit from other people insights. But at the end of the conversation I shared a warning about having a critical spirit toward Christ's church. I shared a long quote from one of the all-time classic books on the church, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* (pgs. 28-30):

“Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients. We thank God for what He has done for us. We thank God for giving us brethren who live by His call, by His forgiveness, and His promise. We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what He does give us daily.

And is not what has been given us enough: brothers, who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of his grace? ...

Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ? Will not

his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Christ Jesus? ...

In the Christian community thankfulness is just what it is anywhere else in the Christian life. Only he who gives thanks for little things receives big things. We prevent God from giving us the great spiritual gifts He has in store for us, because we do not give thanks for daily gifts. ...

We pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet not so small) gifts. How can God entrust great things to one who will not thankfully receive from Him the little things? If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith, and difficulty; if on the contrary, we only keep complaining to God that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ.

This applies in a special way to the complaints often heard from pastors and zealous members about their congregations. A pastor should not complain about his congregations, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. A congregation has not been entrusted to him in order that he should become its accuser before God and men. When a person becomes alienated from a Christian community in which he has been placed and begins to raise complaints about it, he had better examine himself first to see whether the trouble is not due to his wish dream that should be shattered by God; and if this be the case, let him thank God for leading him into this predicament.

... guard against ever becoming an accuser of the congregation before God. Let him rather accuse himself for his unbelief. Let him pray to God for understanding of his own failure and his particular sin, and pray that he may not wrong his brethren. Let him, in the consciousness of his own guilt, make intercession for his brethren. Let him do what he is committed to do, and thank God . . .

What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God. Just as the Christian should not be constantly feeling his spiritual pulse, so, too, the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be constantly taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases.”

If we saw each assembly of faithful saints as God sees her we would esteem her with our highest praise.