

Gospel Covenant Publications

August 2011 Newsletter

www.gcpublications.com

Be Careful Where You Go To Church

By Michael Wagner

Many Christians today seem to think that the decision to attend any particular church is not a big deal. They are willing to attend various churches of different theological persuasions (such as Pentecostal, Baptist, Presbyterian, Reformed, charismatic, nondenominational, etc.) to see which one is most appealing. As long as the church claims to believe the Bible, the other doctrines it advocates don't really matter. The friendliness of the people and the personality of the pastor are more important considerations.

But approaching church attendance in this manner is dangerous according to the Bible. Consider the following line of reasoning:

Doctrinal error is sinful.

In Galatians 5:20 heresies are listed as being among the works of the flesh along with idolatry, witchcraft, adultery, fornication and other serious sins. Heresies are false doctrines, so believing a false doctrine is a work of the flesh, which is to say, a sin.

Scottish theologian George Gillespie emphasizes the sinful nature of doctrinal error: "Let no man think that opinions are free more than practices, or that a man runs no hazard of his salvation by erroneous and heretical opinions. Error of judgement, as well as wickedness of practice, may bring death and destruction upon the soul, James v. 19,20; 2 Pet. ii. 1; iii. 16; Gal. ii. 21. Heretics, as well as murderers and drunkards, are there excluded from the kingdom of heaven" (*The Works of George Gillespie*, Vol. 2., p. 66).

There are different degrees of doctrinal error, of course. Some errors are damnable heresies that when embraced are certain to send people to Hell. For example, people who reject the Bible's teaching on the Trinity, and instead embrace one of the Unitarian heresies, will go to Hell because they have spurned the true God and broken the First Commandment.

However, people who believe that the proper method of baptism is by immersion rather than sprinkling or pouring (and otherwise embrace true doctrine) would not end up in Hell simply due to that error.

Basically, damnable heresies are doctrinal errors that attack fundamentals of the faith, i.e., doctrines essential for salvation. Errors that don't undermine fundamental doctrines are not spiritually fatal.

All doctrinal error is sinful, but there are degrees of error, and some errors are much more dangerous than others.

Joining a church which upholds doctrinal error is sinful.

All churches are formed on the basis of a particular doctrinal position. People who join a church are expected to uphold (to one degree or another) the church's doctrine. So if someone joins a church with an erroneous doctrinal position, he or she is embracing doctrinal error and therefore sinning. The person who joins such a church is thereby participating in the church's error.

Attending the worship and preaching of a church which is established on a sinful basis must therefore also be sinful.

If a church is known to uphold doctrinal error, participating in the official acts of the church without protesting against the error is sinful.

The Bible says that if we see a Christian brother sin, we are to encourage him to repent: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" Galatians 6:1. But participating in the ministry of a church which has been established on a sinful foundation encourages the sin because the participation is regarded as a form of approval.

To walk out of a theatre or cinema during a play or movie is widely regarded as showing disapproval of the play or movie being presented. To walk out of a church service would also be interpreted as a sign of disapproval. Remaining in the theatre, cinema, or church service, on the other hand, would clearly be seen as not disapproving of whatever is occurring. No one would interpret participation in a church service as showing disapproval of that church.

It is inconsistent to recognize that a church upholds sinful beliefs, and then join with its worship without protesting against the sin. Such participation makes one a "partaker of other men's sins" (1 Timothy 5:22).

The people in an erring church may be very zealous, sincere and nice. The church may do much good for the kingdom of God through evangelism and other ministry. But even a little bit of sin is still sin, as far as the Lord is concerned. It cannot be overlooked.

Where To Go To Church

Some people argue that Christians should attend or join "the best" church in their vicinity. Determining which is the "best" church requires a standard that can be used in evaluating each of the churches. Of course, the ultimate standard is God's Word, the Bible. However, every evangelical church will claim to be faithfully following the Bible despite the fact that there are dozens (if not hundreds) of differing and contradictory doctrines among the various evangelical churches. Thus having a summary of true Biblical doctrine is essential for determining which church really is the "best".

In the 1640s such a summary was produced by the most qualified Bible-believing theologians of Britain. The Westminster Standards (including the Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as well as other doctrinal statements) were adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1648 in fulfillment of the Solemn League and Covenant. It is the most Biblical

summary of doctrine yet produced and therefore should be used to determine which churches really are the best.

Comparing all the existing churches with the doctrinal truth of the Westminster Standards will reveal that some are much closer to the truth than others. Some evangelical churches will differ considerably from the Standards whereas others (especially Presbyterian and Reformed churches) will agree in most respects with the Standards.

But even if the doctrinal position of a church agrees in most respects with the Westminster Standards, the few areas of disagreement are errors that the church has embraced. Even small errors are sinful. Thus the reasoning outlined above comes into play and Christians should not attend or join those churches until the errors have been rectified.

At many times in history God's faithful remnant has been a small minority even among the large body of professing Christians. This is also the case today. Those who desire to uphold the Biblical doctrine of the Westminster Standards will frequently find themselves without any local church where they can conscientiously worship the Lord. But the Bible says that "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22) and so avoiding the corporate worship of churches will often be a believer's duty in this day and age. It's a sad truth, to be sure, and an unwelcome message.

This does not mean that Christians are to look for a "perfect church". There is no such thing as a perfect church because there are no perfect Christians. All churches are comprised of sinful human beings and will therefore be imperfect. But it is not too much to expect a church to formally embrace true doctrine, in this case the Westminster Standards.

Churches in the past have faithfully upheld the Westminster Standards. They were not perfect, of course, but they held true doctrine. Requiring a church to embrace the whole truth is not requiring "perfection". Instead, it's simply expecting a church to "hold fast the form of sound words" (2 Timothy 1:13) as commanded by the Lord.

Attending corporate worship and joining a church are very serious matters according to the Bible. Christians should therefore carefully and prayerfully consider their options in light of the revealed will of God. Even attending a church with erroneous doctrine for just one service is sinful disobedience to the Lord.