

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XXV: 3-6

(Reading: Eph.4:1-16; Mat.13:24-30)

How The Church is Where God is Here

We saw in our considering the first and second Articles of this 25th Chapter of the Confession of Faith that there is much negativity amongst Christians today towards the church. While all believers today are keen to declare their being joined to the invisible church - the church of all ages and all places - they are keeping the visible church at arm's length. In fact, quite a few aren't members of a local church at all!

This is not helped by a number of leading, contemporary Christian speakers and authors who openly denigrate the church. One of these is Philip Yancey. He is a well-known and very popular evangelical writer who had a best-selling book which was specifically about this. His book is called *Soul Survivor: How My Faith Survived the Church*. And that title says it all, doesn't it? Well, we're going to come back to Yancey's book. But what he's saying is that somehow somewhere the church got off track. The precious fellowship the early New Testament Church had has long gone.

So, they say, that wonderful scene in Acts 2, the verses 42 till 47, has to be reclaimed. And don't they let you know it! We've been missing out for hundreds, even thousands, of years!

And we've been missing out, they say, in a way that touches everything. It's the songs we sing and the music we sing it to. It's the love that's shown. It's the revelatory gifts - tongues, prophecy, miracles.

What is conveniently forgotten, or perhaps isn't known at all, is that right at the beginning the early church had its troubles, too. While Acts 2 may have painted the lovely picture of Christians gathering around the word and sacraments together and having everything in common together, already in Acts 6 there's strife. As verse 1 says there, "the Grecian Jews among them complained against those of the Aramaic-speaking community because their widows were being overlooked." Along with the glory of the true church we also see how inglorious it is. The same apostle who urged the believers in 1st Corinthians chapters 10 and 11 to be united and have no divisions but be perfectly joined together in the same mind, straight-away admitted there were such troubles there. Paul even goes on to say in chapter 11 verse 19, "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval."

So, actually, the Church today is really much the same as it was in the apostolic era. Article 3 is quite clear that what we have today is what they had then, because the Church through all ages has the Word. In the words of a first aspect to our sermon, this is about THE PEOPLE OF THE WORD.

The People of the Word

I use the term "people" deliberately. Because some would jump on the word "ministry" and see that what makes a church is the clergyman. Today this same error is repeated when you read advertisements seeking a 'Director' for a church. It all comes down to a certain few in the church. At the time of the Reformation this idea was promoted because Rome taught that the church is the conveyer of salvation. That meant they taught that the church itself was God. And so they believed in an apostolic succession which was kept pure by the Holy Spirit.

The truth is, however, that the church is but the God-ordained preacher of salvation. And if ever any church were not to declare the Word its lamp-stand would be taken away.

That still makes the church hold the most special place. But it means that everyone in the church together shares that place.

One church showed this on its bulletin. Under the title 'Minister' it didn't have the name of their full-time minister of religion but it said: "Every member of this congregation."

Now, we have to be careful that this doesn't get to the extreme where the ministry becomes quite denigrated. It has happened that Reformed-Presbyterian churches have become so focused on everyone participating that their worship services became circuses. In some of these churches the minister ended up by being given a maximum of ten minutes to share his message!

That's certainly not according to God's Word. And it's only a church based solidly on the Word which has the unity and purity God blesses. You only need to read through the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 to see that!

This is why we have to realise that the word "oracles" in Article 3 means "the Word". And the word "ordinances" is another word for "the sacraments", which confirm the Word. This is about "gathering and perfecting" THE PEOPLE OF THE WORD.

In other words, any one who meets us should see in us that we are people of the Word. Of course, that should be because we are known as honest people, but especially it should be because we proclaim God's Word. So what we see as important in the worship services on the Sunday has to be shown to be important during the other six days. In the same way we get upset when we're in a church that doesn't open up the Bible so we should be deeply disturbed in ourselves when we aren't declaring it every day.

The People Under His Word

This is what Article 4 brings out further. And so we move from being THE PEOPLE OF THE WORD to being THE PEOPLE UNDER HIS WORD. This is our second aspect.

Let me illustrate this: There has always been the temptation in the church to become caught up with charity. We can't help it really. The Gospel is all about love. And isn't it when we care for the poor that we preach the gospel to them?

Francis of Assisi is said to have invited a monk to assist him in bringing the gospel to a certain village. They spent the whole day in works of mercy and never got around to preaching. Toward evening his companion inquired of Francis when they were going to begin to preach. Francis replied that they had been preaching all day.

It's a popular story. But it misses the point. Because how can anyone believe, as Romans 10 verse 14 says, unless someone preaches to them? In fact, why were there deacons ordained in the first place in Acts 6? Wasn't it because, as the apostles said there in verse 2, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word in order to wait on tables?"

Article 4 says the purity of the church is tied up with whether or not "the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them." In fact, where there is no struggle for keeping the church pure, you will soon find people leaving that church looking for it. And this is precisely where we have come to today. For what Philip Yancey does is set up an exclusivistic group aside from the church. He becomes a self-appointed guru.

How can I say that? Well, Yancey's problem is not with the church which is all Christians together in Christ's Body. He was struggling with what he experienced in certain congregations.

And it's interesting that in his book he needed another set of Christians to help him redefine his faith – a group of Christians who inspired him; a group of Christians who are, in the vast majority, loyal church members.

So Yancey in painting a straw man of the church makes himself the church. And he straightaway repeats those mistakes he saw in the church. Because he again brings it back to what we experience personally. He tells the same old sappy stories. It's all so emotional! But it's not scriptural!

This is where we can help such Christians today, and there are many of them. They are not happy with all the shallow hype and hip-hop and bee-bop and snap, crackle, and pop. The Philip Yancey's can't keep them entertained for long. They know the church ought to be about something objective. And that object is something to do with the Word.

This is why we must be **THE PEOPLE UNDER HIS WORD**. They have to see it when they worship with us. And while it may not be nothing like they are used to they have to come away acknowledging that everything was indeed under the Word. The Word they heard and saw while with us.

Tim Stafford tells the story of a friend of his - Lillian - who joined an ordinary church. She appreciated the fellowship there. It was a spiritual home for her and her family. Except for the pastor.

Now, the pastor was not a bad man. In fact, he was a good man. But Lillian realised that he held back the church.

It seems that early in his ministry he had experienced an ugly split in a church he led. The incident marked him. At bottom he was afraid. He had to keep control, he thought. So he stifled any initiative.

A consistent pattern showed itself: A new lay leader would appear, he would optimistically rally the church towards new ministry, and then eventually - worn out by the pastor's style of indirection and manipulation - would quit the church and go elsewhere.

Whenever Lillian's out-of-town friends came to visit, they were struck by the church's attractiveness. "We learned to hate the 'p' word," Lillian says. "People were always telling us how much potential the church showed."

Lillian sometimes thought that if the pastor had been a bad man, had acted in an obviously sinful way, they might have got rid of him. As it was, she realised, he would never leave. He had at least a decade to go before retirement. That began to seem like a life sentence.

She realised how bad her attitude had become when one Sunday the pastor said he had an important announcement to make. She sat up straight. Her heart began to beat hard, and her face flushed. Was he going to announce that he was leaving for another church? She could hardly breathe. "The wonderful news I have to share with you," the pastor said with unfeigned excitement, "is that thanks to the generosity of this congregation I have a new carpet in my office."

Lillian wanted to cry. But Lillian does not leave churches, unless it is for a much better reason than frustration with a pastor's leadership style. She stayed. She worked. She found places she could make a difference.

And she suffered. She felt deeply the gap between what her church should be and what it actually was. It took, indeed, almost twenty long years before the pastor finally sank into retirement. Looking back now, many years later, Lillian finds she cannot think a negative thought about those years and her choice to stay. It was like having a baby, she thinks. However difficult, she would

not trade the experience or the result. Something died in her, but something came to life. That something was Christ.

Lillian was under the Word. And she was kept by none other than the Word Himself!

The People Kept by the Word

This brings us to the third aspect to this sermon, because in Articles 5 and 6 we see THE PEOPLE KEPT BY THE WORD. For while Lillian stayed in her church there are times when you actually should leave a church.

In Lillian's situation it doesn't seem to have been a factor. Her minister, for all his inadequacies, faithfully proclaimed God's Word. So she was blessed by the Lord for that.

But when Article 5 speaks about some churches having so degenerated to become synagogues of Satan then we acknowledge that a church no longer holds the lampstand. It's a time, to use the words of Matthew 13 verse 25, when the weeds have completely taken over the field. It's a time, to use the words of Ephesians 4 verse 14, when every wind of teaching and the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming has bowled the saints over.

G. I. Williamson speaks of a "point of no return". This comes when a church imposes upon its members the unavoidable necessity of participation in sin. When this point is reached, the Scripture is clear. As Revelation 18 verse 4 says, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues."

The difficulty is in defining when such a point has come. And when one believes that point has been reached others may disagree, even those who hold very similar views.

In the Christian Reformed Churches of North America there were those in the 1980's who believed that certain decisions about the interpretation of scripture meant they had to leave. It was an interpretation of Scripture that resulted in women being ordained into the office of deacon. So the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches were instituted.

Later on, in the 1990's, another wave left after women were ordained into the eldership and ministry of the CRCNA. They formed the United Reformed Churches.

And now there are more who are hovering on leaving. Perhaps it might be the recent moves in that denomination to ordain practising homosexuals which might see them come out.

So, you see, there can be quite a range of views on when you ought to withdraw from a church being unfaithful to scriptures. But while those times are hard personally, there is guidance in the scriptures about it. We heard the quote from Revelation 18.

Then there is what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 16. He spoke there to his disciples about the keys of the kingdom – the keys which are the preaching of the Word and discipline, because they open and shut the Kingdom. Keys though that could be taken away from a church, as Revelation 2 and 3 show us.

This is why we speak about the 'marks' of a true church. These 'marks' are what characterises a biblical church.

There are three of these marks. Two are already indicated in Article 4 when it speaks of the faithful preaching of the Word and the scriptural administration of the sacraments. And the third is church discipline.

A church that is serious about being a church will have these three. Now it may not have them to the same degree as others. Article 4 talks about this as being "more or less pure" and Article 5 as "mixture and error" being present.

Sometimes it can even seem that there is no faithful church left on earth. The Lord raised this possibility in Luke 18 verse 8 when he wondered if there would be a church left when He returned. Mind you, He wasn't saying that there wouldn't a church at all. He was challenging us to be always praying - like the persistent widow. You see, if we aren't communing with the Lord we aren't being kept by the Word.

It's in Article 6 that we confess the reason as to why there will always be a church to worship God according to his will. For who is the head of the church but Jesus Christ Himself! No one else can assume that place.

And just as well. Because as soon as we put a man in that place the church has no place! Colossians 1 verse 18 is quite clear that only the Lord Jesus Christ is the head of this body. The Confession affirms that the visible expression of the invisible headship of Christ is the absence of any visible head.

The ridiculousness of having someone else as the head of the church has been shown in the man who will be the next head of the Church of England. You see, Prince Charles, himself a divorcee, married a divorcee. And it wasn't in a church marriage - it was a civil ceremony.

The Pope shows us the same. For what use is this old man in Rome? Isn't he the leader of the Church being exposed for so much sexual abuse?

But don't underestimate the power of Rome! While some may think the framers of the Confession went too far in identifying the Pope as the antichrist, a lot of what they predicated is coming true today. Many churches are coming back to Rome. Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran - even Benny Hinn! - have all kissed that ring. The threat is just as strongly there. Rome is even more antichristian and unscriptural than ever before.

And much as Rome may say that the visible headship of the Pope doesn't conflict with the invisible headship of Christ, they do that saying the Pope is the way Christ's headship is performed. Then they make the invisible very visible!

But it's the very face we shouldn't see. Because how then can it be by faith? Faith which is what we do not see. And if it's not by faith how can it ever be according to God's will?

Then you know it's wrong. For then God's people aren't being kept by the Word. The Word which is the Living Word - Jesus Christ Himself! He is the Alpha and the Omega, He is the faithful witness, He is the firstborn from the dead, and He is the ruler of the kings of the earth. He is not giving up on you. In fact, He is working hard on you. He has married the Church for you.