

ILLINOIS LUTHERAN CONFERENCE

Topical Bulletin, July 2017

This is the first issue of a monthly topical bulletin in which timely questions will be Biblically answered.

A common question heard these days is: *Does it really matter what church a Christian attends?* Occasionally, the following or a similar statement is made to the same effect: *No church is perfect, so it's a matter of Christian liberty as to what church I join and attend, because all that really counts is that I have faith in Jesus Christ as my Savior.*

My friends, I've personally heard such questions and statements, and I'm sure most of you have too. In fact, I've heard similar questions and statements from some folks who have left our fellowship and subsequently joined other church bodies.

In the above question and statement the term "church" is used in reference to a local congregation, just as it is used in a number of places in the Holy Bible. For example, just to name a few, in the book of Revelation we read of: "the church in Smyrna" (2:8), "the church in Pergamos" (2:12), "the church in Thyatira" (2:18), "the church in Sardis" (3:1), and "the church in Philadelphia" (3:7). The English word "church" in the aforementioned Bible references is a translation of the Greek root word ἐκκλησία (ekklesia), meaning: "an assembly of Christians gathered for worship"— [Thayer's Greek/English Lexicon]. Take note of the fact the main purpose of a local church is that CHRISTIANS GATHER TOGETHER FOR WORSHIP. The term "Christian" {Greek-Χριστιανος (Christianos)} means: "a follower of Christ"— [Thayer's Greek/English Lexicon].

Therefore, according to Holy Scripture, the group of people which constitute a local congregation are to be followers of Christ gathered together for worship. Now, it's absolutely true that faith in Jesus Christ really counts and is necessary if one would be saved, for concerning faith in Christ Holy Writ relates: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." (Acts 4:12; Mark 16:16) Nevertheless, it is also absolutely true that in regards to worship JESUS CHRIST states: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship *him* in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24) Observe the vital necessity of WORSHIPING GOD IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH!

Thus, the Lord requires our worship be prompted by His Holy Spirit and that our worship issue forth from our spirit rather than being mere lip-service; and, the Lord requires that our worship be in truth— our worship must flow from sincere faith in Christ who is the TRUTH, and our worship must be in full accord with God's Word which is TRUTH, for our Lord says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." (John 14:6; 17:17) Additionally, Hebrews 11:6 informs us that "without faith *it is* impossible to please *him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Furthermore, we read in Romans 8:26-27, "the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God." Hence, heart-deep faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for proper God-pleasing Christian worship; and, having, using, and holding fast to God's Holy Word is necessary for proper God-pleasing Christian worship.

Bearing the aforementioned Biblical truths in mind, it is clear that sound BIBLE-BASED DOCTRINE is to be of the utmost importance to Christians as they gather together as a CHURCH to worship, for the Lord Jesus Christ plainly declares: "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me." (John 7:16-17; 14:23-24) Therefore, clinging to the TRUE HOLY BIBLE, the true pure preserved Word of God, is to be of vital importance to the individual Christian and to the church he or she attends; and consequently, holding to sound Scriptural doctrine is to be of vital importance in the local church the individual Christian attends and in which he or she holds membership.

There is NO room for compromise when it comes to God's TRUTH since the Holy Bible commands: "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil. Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. Let us hold fast the profession of *our* faith without wavering; (for he *is* faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some *is*; but exhorting *one another*: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22; 2 Timothy 1:13; Hebrews 10:23-27; Romans 16:17-18) Accordingly, it is quite UN-CHRISTIAN to join and/or attend a church without due concern for the doctrines held, proclaimed, promoted, and practiced by that church-body or by the larger group to which it may be attached.

The Lord Jesus Christ clearly commands: "If ye love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:15) Therefore, in light of all the facts from the Holy Bible that we've looked at thus far in this topical bulletin, how can any Christian honestly think it doesn't matter what church he or she attends? How can anyone who claims to love the Lord Jesus disregard His Word? How can any true follower of Christ honestly believe it's a matter of Christian liberty as to what church he or she joins and attends because all that really counts is that he or she has faith in Jesus Christ as his or her Savior? What kind of a "faith" in Jesus Christ deliberately and wilfully ignores what Jesus says? The answer is: only a "faith" of the head and mouth rather than a God-given faith of the heart and soul can willingly ignore the Lord's Word, for Jesus Himself pronounces the verdict when He declares: "He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear *them* not, because ye are not of God." (John 8:47) The imperfection of the members which constitute a Christian congregation is not reason for one to hold that it doesn't matter what church one attends, nor does Christian liberty permit the Christian to deliberately and wilfully sin against the Lord and His Word.

Concerning the statement, *no church is perfect*, it is true that no congregation is perfect in that the people which constitute any congregation are all sinners, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) However, that is precisely why Christians need the REAL JESUS CHRIST and HIS TRUE HOLY WORD, and the sound Scriptural doctrines drawn from the genuine Holy Word, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. The law of the LORD *is* perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD *is* sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD *are* right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD *is* pure,

enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD *is* clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD *are* true *and* righteous altogether. More to be desired *are they* than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.” (John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Psalm 19:7-10) Thus, we are to desire and highly value only that which is right in God’s sight— chiefly, the real Savior and His pure preserved Word.

Now, in regards to *Christian liberty*, the fact is: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed *is* every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty.” (Galatians 3:13-14; 2 Corinthians 3:17) We Christians are no longer under the bondage of the Law with all its Old Testament ceremonial observances, for Colossians 2:16-17 declares: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath *days*: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ.” We do have liberty in Christ— freedom from the Old Testament civil and ceremonial laws.

However, we are NOT free to disregard Christ or disregard His Word and thereby deliberately and wilfully sin, for Galatians 5:13-14 plainly states: “brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only *use* not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” My friends, it is most unloving toward our neighbor if we pretend that doctrine is unimportant and therefore a Christian can join and/or attend any church he or she chooses. Our faith in Christ is to be a “faith which worketh by love.” (Galatians 5:6) Love demands that we desire our neighbor and ourselves to have and continue in the true faith of Jesus Christ unto the end, since only the genuine Jesus Christ is the SAVIOR of sinners; and, the genuine Jesus Christ says: “If ye continue in my word, *then* are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31-32) Hence, it is obvious that if professed Christians fail to have Christ’s true Word and fail to continue in that Holy Word, then they are NOT Jesus’ disciples indeed nor do they know the truth, but are rather Christians in name only and not in fact; such folks need to sincerely repent and amend their ways while they yet have time.

Accordingly, IT DEFINITELY MATTERS WHAT CHURCH the Christian joins and/or attends. The Christian’s faith needs to be fed the pure Word of God or that person’s faith will finally wither and die, which is why the Holy Bible commands each and every Christian: “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious.” (1 Peter 2:2-3) The sour milk of false bibles and their false doctrines cannot give, sustain, or strengthen saving faith in Christ.

God grant that we all value the TRUTH, and that we therefore cling to the genuine Jesus Christ and His pure preserved Holy Word, valuing our ILC churches which by God’s grace and mercy have the full TRUTH. And, let us regularly pray for those who have never had the truth or who have had the truth but have left it: pray that they repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, the God/man, the one true Savior of the world; and, pray that they embrace the full truth of God’s Word and thereby desire to worship God in spirit and in truth without compromise even if it means worshiping in a numerically small group, for Jesus promises: “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20)

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