

IN RESPONSE - PART THREE, IS THE CHURCH IMPORTANT?

by Dennis Prutow

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We have seen public worship is commanded by God and exemplified by Jesus. In addition, discipleship involves the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's supper. The observance of both are commanded by Christ.

Reason six then retorts, "I get all the fellowship I need from television." Answer: Romans 12:4-5 and Ephesians 4:25.

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Romans 12:4-5).

The church is a body similar to the human body. It cannot function properly if one or more of its members is not present. If you cut off your thumb, you cannot pick up your Bible with that hand. You are handicapped. This is true in the church. If a part of the body sits at home in front of the television, other members of the body are affected. Paul says the same thing in Ephesians 4:24. "Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another."

One of the implications of our being members of one another is our conversation with one another. You cannot converse with other members of the body when you stay home and sit in front of your television set. This is *not* fellowship. Fellowship literally means *participation* in the life of the body. Television simply does not provide the means of participation.

Reason Seven: "My relationship with God is personal and private." This might be the response to the argument just given. Answers come from Matthew 10:32-33, Luke 12:8, and Acts 11:26.

Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 10:32-33).

Christianity is *not* a private affair. You must make public declaration of your faith. Refusal to do so is a denial of Christ who commands public confession. Denial of Christ in this life leads to eternal death

in the life to come. Luke 12:8-9 says the same thing.

And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God; but he who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God.

Acts 11:25-26 show the results of public confession of Christ. Barnabus sought out Paul and the two of them formed a church in Antioch.

And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

The people of Antioch saw the disciples and recognized them as followers of Jesus Christ. As a result, they were nicknamed "Christians". It is obvious the faith and commitment of these believers was not private but very public. This reason elicited for not aligning one's self with a church body therefore falls to the ground.

Notice Acts 11:26 says, "The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." Paul and Barnabus busied themselves with the task of making disciples. Is it conceivable they would have made disciples in a fashion contrary to the command of Christ? No! According to the Great Commission, baptism is a vital part of the discipleship process. When Paul and Barnabus formed the loose coalition of believers in Antioch into a church, the believers were baptized. Then this baptized body sat under the teaching of Paul and Barnabus. This body was very visible. For this reason, the people of Antioch saw it and dubbed the disciples Christians.

Reason Eight: "The people we need to reach are in the world not in the church." Answer: Acts 13:1-4. The excuse offered here falsely sets the mission of the church against her worship. Those who take this excuse upon their lips think they are excused from formal worship because they want to fully engage in mission. These people forget the God ordained instrument for carrying out the Great Commis-

sion is the church. See Part Two. Acts 13:1-4 gives us the classic example.

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

Notice several things. Paul and Barnabus were a vital part of the church at Antioch. These two men, by the grace of God, were instrumental in building that church (Acts 11:19-26). While the church gathered for worship and service before the Lord, the prophets within its number spoke, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." The Holy Spirit spoke *through His church*.

Then the *church* set aside Paul and Barnabus through the laying on of hands. Paul and Barnabus did not act independently of the church. It was through the church they were called to the mission field and through the church they were commissioned to the mission field.

Finally, the action of the church under the direction of the Holy Spirit is equated with the sending of the Spirit.

Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

The people we need to reach are outside the church. But the church is *God's agent* for reaching those people. The church should therefore not be abandoned.

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IN RESPONSE - PART FOUR: IS THE CHURCH IMPORTANT?

by Dennis Prutow

When Paul and Barnabus completed their first missionary journey, "They sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished" (Acts 14:26). They did not forget the church that commissioned them but returned to report on their journey and on the grace of God. The church at Antioch then sent Paul and Barnabus to Jerusalem to inquire of the elders there on a profound doctrinal matter (Acts 15:3). After the Jerusalem Council met, "Paul and Barnabus stayed in Antioch" (Acts 15:35). All along the line, Paul acted under the commission and authority of the church at Antioch.

How can we best determine if we are acting under the power and by the authority of the Holy Spirit? Do we launch out in an independent fashion leaving the church behind and ignoring her fellowship? The answer must be No.

When a church follows the Word of the Holy Spirit, the Bible, she is an authorized agent of God the Father. When she proclaims the apostolic gospel of Jesus Christ, she is an authorized agent of Jesus Christ. When she is filled with the Spirit of worship and holiness as outlined in the Bible, she is an authorized agent of the Holy Spirit.

Men and women called to service through the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit will fit the qualifications outlined by the Spirit in the Bible. When these men and women are commissioned by the church in accordance with the Word of God found in the Bible, they may have the confidence they are sent by the Holy Spirit. Paul makes this explicit in Acts 20:28,

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

It is presumptuous to act independent of the visible church and claim to be sent by the Holy Spirit, *if we take apostolic teaching and example seriously.*

Reason Nine: "I go to church once in a while, what's wrong with church hopping?" Answer: Hebrews 10:24-25.

Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not

forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.

We cannot stimulate one another to love and good deeds if we absent ourselves from the gathering of God's People. We cannot encourage one another if we absent ourselves from God's church. We cannot *receive* adequate stimulus to good deeds nor encouragement if we do not worship regularly with God's people.

Going to church once in a while is inadequate. We will never learn the needs of others nor become a real part of a loving fellowship with infrequent attendance. We must become a part of a body in order to serve and be served in that local body. Church hopping will not do.

Some people say weekly Bible study groups fulfill the mandate of Hebrews 10:25. As we have seen, the apostolic church met on the first day of the week as a body for witness and worship. The first day of the week is called the Lord's Day in Scripture (Revelation 1:10). This means it is a day *especially* reserved for Christ as His day. It is true other days of the week should be dedicated to the Lord and His service. We are to serve Christ every day. But the first day of the week is declared by God a day of rest and worship. It is sanctified, set aside, for this purpose. Weeknight Bible studies do not excuse us from worship.

Reason Ten: "God gave Sunday for rest; church is work for me." Answer: Exodus 20:8-11 and Hebrews 4:9-11.

Based upon the example of God in creation, He calls us to rest one day in seven. The seventh day is sanctified.

In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

We are to rest from our weekly labors and come before God for worship on the Lord's Day.

Some say, "Sunday is my only day of relaxation. It is hard for me to get up and go to church; it is just too much work." This is a misuse of the words "work" and "rest". We see this in Hebrews 4:9-11.

There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience.

The work with which God is concerned is your daily labor. Work here does not refer to degree of difficulty. It may seem difficult to get up and go to worship because you are not in the habit of doing so. This has nothing to do with the work mentioned in the Fourth Commandment.

The rest with which God is concerned is not simply a cessation of labor. The rest is God's rest. It is the rest we experience when we are properly united to Him. It is a rest we will fully experience in heaven. Now where can we most fully experience the rest of heaven in this world? We get a taste of heaven when we gather with God's people for worship on the first day of the week.

The gathered church of God is a temple being built by God for a dwelling place of the Spirit (1 Peter 2:5, Ephesians 2:21-22). In this gathered church indwelt by the Spirit, we partake of the Spirit and taste of the powers of the age to come (Hebrews 6:4-5). As we assemble, we are on the outskirts of heaven. The writer to the Hebrews tells us:

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect (Hebrews 12:22-23).

God's people assemble on the first day of the week with saints all over the world. They gather around the throne of God with the hosts of heaven, myriads of angels and glorified saints. The church then joins the choir of heaven to worship her King and Lord. It is a pity when men and women who profess Christ as their Lord find such worship too laborious.

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IN RESPONSE - IMPRECATORY PRAYER, PART ONE

by Dennis Prutow

This question came in response to the idea God is now answering specific imprecatory prayers. "Could you address in a sermon how we should use malediction against such notorious enemies[;h]ow do we love our enemies, not gloss over their tearing babies apart, and call for their destruction?"

The answer is twofold. First, we must make a distinction between common grace and love and special grace and love. God has a particular and peculiar love for His people, the elect in all ages. This love is in view when Paul exhorts, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). Husbands must maintain a special love for their wives reserved only for them. They must not love other women as they love their wives. They cannot love other men in the same way they love their wives. The Bible is clear on these points. Reprehensible sin is involved in embracing other women or men in the same way wives are to be cherished and loved. Again, there is a special love, a saving love, God manifests through Christ for His elect people.

On the other hand, God gives all human beings the benefits of His common love, His common grace. God calls us to emulate Him on this count too.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:43-45).

Rain and sunshine are manifestations of God's love to all people. It is in the context of common love that Christ exhorts the love of our enemies. In other words, we are to extend to those opposed to us all the common courtesies due other human beings. Unbelievers are neighbors with which we must live. We owe them, under God, the respect outlined in the second table of the Law. We are to respect proper authority, respect the life and well-being of other people, respect the sanctity of their marriages and homes, respect their property rights, respect the

value of their names and reputations, and never covet their property, reputation, family, or abilities. In these ways God commands us to love our enemies.

Secondly, and in addition, although men and women may trample our property and good name, take advantage of family members, and even assault our wives or husbands, sexually abusing them, we are not permitted to take vengeance against our enemies. We must love them; that is, we must always pay the proper respect, give them the courtesies they deny us; and we must pray for them. The point is simple. Romans 12:19 is clear.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. We never have the right to take matters into our own hands. Vengeance always belongs to God.

This is why David never takes matters into His own hands when Saul is persecuting Him. More than once David has the opportunity to kill Saul and take vengeance on the man who more than once tried to murder him. David refuses. Instead, he prays. David knows the justice of God will be executed. When it is, it will be far more severe than anything David could possibly mete out. In this connection we find David's imprecations. Psalm 59:9-15 is a good example.

Because of his strength I will watch for Thee, for God is my stronghold. My God in His lovingkindness will meet me; God will let me look triumphantly upon my foes. Do not slay them, lest my people forget; scatter them by Thy power, and bring them down, O Lord, our shield. On account of the sin of their mouth and the words of their lips, let them even be caught in their pride, and on account of curses and lies which they utter. Destroy them in wrath, destroy them, that they may be no more; that men may know that God rules in Jacob, to the ends of the earth. Selah. And they return at evening, they howl like a dog, and go around the city. They wander about for food, and growl if they are not satisfied.

The title to this psalm tells us "Saul sent men, and they watched the house [of

David] in order to kill him." The story is told in 1 Samuel 19:11-12.

Then Saul sent messengers to David's house to watch him, in order to put him to death in the morning. But Michal, David's wife, told him, saying, "If you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be put to death." So Michal let David down through a window, and he went out and fled and escaped.

This situation precipitated the prayer of Psalm 59. It is not a general prayer. It is a prayer relating to specific enemies of David. David's prayer is urgent. He cries out to God for swift justice that God's glory may be fully known. The prayer is powerful.

Scatter them by Thy power, and bring them down, O Lord, our shield. On account of the sin of their mouth and the words of their lips, let them even be caught in their pride, and on account of curses and lies which they utter. Destroy them in wrath, destroy them, that they may be no more; that men may know that God rules in Jacob, to the ends of the earth.

David beseeches the Throne of Grace that power from on high will bring vengeance on the lying tongue and arrogant stance of Saul and his henchmen.

These Old Testament stories are nothing more or less than pictures of the hatred spewed against Christ and His followers by the disciples of the evil one in the present age. The songs and prayers in the psalms are therefore truth to be taken upon the lips of Christ and His disciples. *How do we love our enemies, not gloss over their tearing babies apart, and call for their destruction?* We follow David. He refused to take vengeance himself. David gave Saul every common courtesy. David also went to prayer seeking the justice of God.

Next we will look at how God commonly takes vengeance and how we may pray for vengeance while always treating others with common decency and love.

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IN RESPONSE - IMPRECATORY PRAYER, PART TWO

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How does God commonly take vengeance and how may we pray for vengeance while always treating others with common decency and love?

We turn to Romans 13:1-4 for an answer to the first part of the question.

Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil.

Government is an institution ordained by God for the human good (1 Peter 2:3). Rulers and governors are therefore ministers of God. Governors and judges are the hand of God avenging evil. Paul said this of the evil Roman empire. Courts are therefore proper avenues, proper means, ordained by God for the execution of justice. When the courts are unjust, God Himself avenges the evil in the system ordained to bring about good.

By the same token, the courts of the church are God ordained means for administering justice within the body of Christ.

It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of His Church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto

in His Word (Westminster Confession of Faith 31:3).

Both the civil court and the church court are therefore means appointed by God to avenge evil, correct the erring, and guide civil and ecclesiastical conduct. In extreme cases, sanctions can be severe. In the civil sphere we see a return to the death penalty. In the ecclesiastical sphere, excommunication is the heaviest sanction that can be imposed (Matthew 18:17, 1 Corinthians 5:1-2). The point I am attempting to make bears repeating. Individuals, acting on their own, are never privileged to seek revenge. This is God's prerogative; and God has certain means He uses in this world to avenge evil. Civil and ecclesiastical courts are part of these means.

While individuals are privileged to use these means, a vengeful spirit is never allowable *in their use*. The command is to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love our enemies (Matthew 22:39, Matthew 5:44). From the heart, we must treat our enemies or opponents with dignity and respect. We would wish to be treated by them in the same way. Matthew 7:12 sets out this "Golden Rule." "Therefore, however you want people to treat you, so treat them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Calvin comments in this vein on the use of civil courts with regard to 1 Corinthians 6:7.

Let us therefore remember that Paul does not disapprove of law-suits on the ground that it is wrong in itself to uphold a good case by having recourse to a magistrate, but because they are nearly always bound up with improper attitudes of mind, such as lack of self control, desire for revenge, hostility, obstinacy and so on.¹

In other words, we may resort to the use of civil courts but we ought not to bear bitterness, animosity, and vengefulness in our hearts. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice" (Ephesians 4:31). The heart going to court, civil or ecclesiastical, must be set on the glory of God revealed in His justice

and not personal vindication. "Vengeance is Mine," says the Lord (Deuteronomy 32:35).

If I sharpen My flashing sword, and My hand takes hold on justice, I will render vengeance on My adversaries, and I will repay those who hate Me (Deuteronomy 32:41).

Several years ago, I found myself in a very uncomfortable situation. Men in the congregation I served were elected as elders but refused to stand for ordination. They did not agree with the doctrinal standards of the church. They could not take the ordination vows. They also refused to step aside. The church was immobilized. A painful counseling process led to two full blown church trials within the congregation and a third judicial inquiry at the presbytery level. In the midst of it all, my integrity and gifts were openly called into question as efforts were launched by those refusing to be ordained to have presbytery remove me from the congregation.

A close friend and fellow pastor confided how he was publicly praying for our congregation. "Oh God, grant your flashing sword may cut quickly and deeply to bring judgment and justice to your church. May your righteousness shine forth and the enemies of your servants be vanquished and cut off. May your glory and honor be vindicated." *This was imprecatory prayer*. Such prayer, although uncommon, is perfectly appropriate if we come without vengeful hearts. We may legitimately pray, in the words of David, regarding enemies of truth or opponents of righteousness:

Scatter them by Thy power, and bring them down, O Lord, our shield. On account of the sin of their mouth and the words of their lips, let them even be caught in their pride, and on account of curses and lies which they utter. Destroy them in wrath, destroy them, that they may be no more; that men may know that God rules in Jacob, to the ends of the earth (Psalm 59:11-13).

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¹ John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Trans. John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 122.