

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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We return to our conversation about “church.” Remember that I have defined a church as: **Individuals committed to life together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.** With that understanding, I have suggested that the network or “web” of meaning implied by this definition consists of a set of interconnected “nodes.” Working backwards through my definition, I have talked about “Christ” (**No Christ—No Church**), and “life together” (**No Community—No Church**). Today I want to talk about “individuals committed” under the rubric: **No Conversion—No Church.**

Early Baptists were determined that the only legitimate church was a “believer’s church.” The position countered two widespread opinions of that day. The first was that of infant baptism. Baptists understand that God’s offer is something that must be freely accepted, and cannot coerced or forced on others. Baptism is a sign of conversion. Since infants are incapable of conversion, it is inappropriate to baptize them.

The second opinion this challenged was a nominalist or formalist understanding of the church. Conversion was the key, not the “mere recitation” of the content of faith. Baptists called that “creedalism.” (For the most part, Baptists agreed with the historic creeds, their problem was with the practice of creedal recitation as proof of faith and as constitutive of the church). We still struggle with this. Most often, we prefer to speak of a “confession” rather than a “creed”— even though the words and form may be identical. The truth is, creeds, at their very best, are personal confessions; and confessions, at their very worst, are empty examples of creedalism.

“Believer’s church” is the basis for the argument for “soul competency.” The actual term did not appear until well into the 20th Century, but the idea was nascent in early Baptist life. While it was influenced and informed by the individualism springing from Enlightenment philosophy, “soul competency” is not the same as self-contained individualism or privatism. Consequently, we must attend to its limits.

At its root, “soul competency” is the idea is that the individual “has within himself [*sic*] by divine gift and right those capacities that make him competent to meet all the demands with which genuine religion confronts him.” (W.R. McNutt, 1935) This is not the same as saying every idea from an individual is true for the Body of Christ or worthy of affirmation. It is a confession of responsibility: I am responsible for my own person before God, and I cannot abdicate that responsibility by pleading incompetence. There are two important restraints on radical individualism: commitment to Christ and

commitment to life together (in community). Soul competency is pre-eminently related to salvation, or soteriology.

“Conversion” deserves more intentional examination than can be given here. For our purposes we will sideline theories of atonement/reconciliation, affirming only that this happens in Christ and because of what Christ has done. (Remember: **No Christ—No Church**). For the moment, let’s focus instead on what is meant by “conversion” and why it is foundational to being church.

“Conversion” is a modern English word. The New Testament term is *metanoia*—a change of mind. Conversion involves our whole being as persons, not just mental (or verbal) assent to propositions or the practice of good deeds.

Conversion presupposes that a state of affairs must be changed. Just what is the state of affairs that must be changed? In the broadest strokes possible, the opening chapters of Genesis present an unfolding story of the four-fold alienation of human beings: we are alienated from God, from others, from Creation, and even from ourselves. Theologically we speak of this alienation as The Fall. Conversion is the response to God’s work to restore relationship through the gracious invitation to become part of the Kingdom of God. Conversion (accepting the invitation to become a citizen of the Kingdom of God by turning toward God) makes church different from the lodge, a coffee klatch, a political action committee, or a self-help group.

In the same way that alienation is multifaceted, *bona fide* conversion impacts my relationship to God, my relationships to others, my relationship to Creation, and my relationship to myself. In other words, conversion is a relationship-building (a community-building!) process. As I am being converted, I get much more than I bargained for. Conversion is more than my soul getting a private ticket into Heaven.

For Baptists (at least most of the ones before the decision-driven revivalism of the 1950’s) conversion was not merely a matter of human will. We really cannot “decide” to become a Christian in the same way that we decide what to wear in the morning. Instead, we submit to God’s call to take up our cross and follow Jesus Christ. To those on the outside, this may seem to be a subtle, probably irrelevant, distinction but it is important for two reasons: first, it reminds us that conversion is by God’s initiative; second, it reminds us that conversion involves a continuing response to a persistent call, and, therefore, we must be humble before God and show compassionate patience with one another.

As I am experiencing conversion, I am driven to form and sustain relationships with others as the “Body of Christ.” Truly, conversion constitutes the church. If “church” is a community of persons in Christ, then it follows that only those persons who have “been converted” are fully part of the church. It was an easy theory for the early Baptists (and many other Protestants). Only those who had knowingly confessed Christ and given a public sign of their discipleship through baptism were the church.

John Smyth (the first clearly identifiable Baptist) penned twenty articles of faith in 1610. The first ten are restatements of “orthodox” faith found in the historic Creeds of the Church (interesting reading for those who think Baptists were opposed to the summary statements of faith we commonly call “creeds”). Article eleven (“That faith, destitute of good works, is vain; but true and living faith is distinguished by good works”) grew out of the Reformation struggle and signaled a movement in the “Articles” from nearly universal understandings of Christianity at that time. Article twelve completes the break with the radical linkage of congregationalism and believer’s church: “That the church of Christ is a company of the faithful; baptized after confession of sin and of faith, endowed with the power of Christ.”

Over 100 years later, in the United States, the New Hampshire confession (1742) would still say: “A visible Church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel.”

But is it really so easy? No. At least three kinds of questions come to mind: First, there is the “why” of the mechanics of church membership; second, there is the necessity, means, and consequences of discipleship (formation); and, third, there is the practice of congregational discipline.



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