

GUEST EDITORIAL: *BOUND TO JOIN*

Rev. Martyn McGeown

A Review of *Bound to Join: Letters on Church Membership*

David J. Engelsma

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The Lamentable Situation

Bound to Join is unique and badly needed in the UK, Europe and, as the author indicates in the preface, in America. The reason for the need is simple: church membership is *despised* by many professing Christians. Many love doctrine; many love to read doctrinal books; many profess to love the church of Jesus Christ; many can speak abstractly about ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, but they are not members of true, instituted churches of Jesus Christ. Some lament their ecclesiastical misery, the lack of the preaching of the gospel and of the sacraments for themselves and for their children, but see no escape from their plight or they are not prepared to make the necessary sacrifices to improve their circumstances.

It was *this* lamentable situation that Prof. David Engelsma addressed at an impromptu meeting organised by many of the attendees at the British Reformed Fellowship Conference in 2004. They bemoaned the absence of faithful Reformed churches in the area in which they lived. Either they were members of no church or reluctant attendees of churches where they could not worship God in good conscience. What could, what *should*, a Christian do in such situations? Engelsma graciously agreed to address this question in a series of e-mails, based squarely on the Word of God as summarised in the Reformed confessions, particularly *Belgic Confession* 28-29. Those e-mails, after some necessary editing, now appear in book form and constitute a stirring call to all believers to join and never leave a true, instituted church of Jesus Christ, where the three marks of the pure preaching of the doctrine of the gospel, the faithful administration of the two sacraments and the proper exercise of Christian discipline are present.

The Absolute Necessity of Church Membership

Belgic Confession 28 states that it is the duty of all men to join the true church “wheresoever God hath established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes are against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment.” This is not hypothetical. When the *Belgic Confession* was written, membership in the true church literally meant arrest, torture and death for some at the hands of the Romish authorities, who forbade anyone to confess the Reformed faith. The cost is rarely as high today in the West, but it does involve financial or social loss, as well as upsetting family and friends. It does mean inconvenience, sometimes considerable inconvenience.

Following the creeds, Engelsma’s position is clear: “Church membership is not an option. It is not even required so long as it does not cause extreme physical hardship. It is demanded by God, regardless of any and all circumstances of our lives” (4). “House, land, job and possessions may not stand in the way” (71; cf. Matt.19:29). In the various chapters, called “Letters,” Engelsma provides instruction about the marks of a true church (what they are and what they are *not*), the reality and threat of the false church and the danger of apostasy, as well as the cost of following Christ *by being a member in a true instituted church*.

The Marks of the True Church: Objective, Not Subjective!

Instruction on the marks of the true church is necessary today. These marks are *objective*. Concerning the first, and primary, mark, Engelsma writes, “The preaching of sound doctrine is as objective and incontrovertible as the colour of the church building” (102). Other proposed marks are considered and rejected: the gifts of the preacher, the friendliness of the members, the size or prominence of the congregation, the mission-mindedness of the members or office-bearers and the loving atmosphere. These things are not unimportant, but they are *subjective*. Who can measure love or liveliness? Others neglect membership in a true church because of the presence of hypocrites or because of the infirmities of the saints. In those situations, let the minister address such weaknesses by his preaching and, if necessary, let the elders admonish and discipline, but do not use these things as a pretext to leave the true church: “No one may refuse to join a true church, or leave it, because of the sinfulness

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of the members or because, as the super-saints today arrogantly put it, “The members of those churches are not pious enough, not spiritual enough, or loving enough ...” (98).

The reader should not expect Engelsma to name which churches are true and which are false. The marks are clear. Let the believer, with good conscience and sanctified wisdom, make application to his own situation. Some religious groups such as Rome, the Church of England, Arminian and Charismatic churches are clearly false. “No believer may be a member of these churches. Every believer who finds himself in one of these churches is duty bound to leave it. Now!” (133). However, the reality of many different denominations in various stages of decline (a church does not become false overnight) makes this complicated for us today, more complex than in the days of the Reformation. For this reason, Engelsma will not spoon-feed believers: “I do not intend to draw the line for members of this forum, or for anyone else ...” (33). Later, he adds,

I do not attempt to lay down rules prescribing exactly when godly, Reformed Christians may and must leave their church or churches for purer churches, or when they should form the church anew. All of us must stand on our own two feet here, keeping in view also the welfare of our children and grandchildren ... Many remain in apostatizing churches far longer than seems right to me. But I am not their judge. God is (142).

What if a believer is in a departing church which has not completely lost the marks? The Reformed believer may not be satisfied to belong to a church, which, as Engelsma puts it, is “barely hanging on to” those marks (69). Is a believer in Sardis (which has a name that it lives but is dead, as Revelation 3:1 says)? Let him remember that Sardis was “lifeless” not “doctrinally deviant” (92). By all means let him work with the members to strengthen those things which remain (v. 2).

Believing members of such [a Sardis-like church], or denomination, who work for repentance and renewal but meet with stubborn impenitence over time, are not required to stay forever in such a church. Do you want to be a member

of a Sardis church when the Lord Jesus comes on it as a thief [and removes its candlestick]? (93).

“Fruitless protesting [must] not go on indefinitely” (121). The *stay in and fight* mentality is only good as long as the one staying in *fight*s. There is precious little fighting by the evangelical wings of the major denominations of our day. Let such take this paragraph to heart:

I suppose that there are still a few Christian clergymen in the Church of England. They justify themselves by saying, as does J. I. Packer, the well-known evangelical Anglican, that they are the faithful adherents to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England (1571), whereas the majority are unfaithful. But if a J. I. Packer were to go up and down in the land, like an Amos, preaching the truth sharply and equally as sharply damning the errors and errorists in the Anglican Church, he would be disciplined within the year, undoubtedly for being a disturber of the peace, a schismatic (34).

Strong Medicine for Serious Ecclesiastical Maladies

Some books are doctrinal. Others are practical. *Bound to Join* is both. Engelsma gives much valuable teaching on the nature of the church, especially as she manifests herself in individual, autonomous, but not independent, congregations of believers and their children. But the most valuable, and sadly, for many, objectionable aspect of the book is the application. A man might wholeheartedly subscribe to the Reformed creeds, and he must if he is Reformed, but trouble comes when the truth of the creeds is *applied*.

Calvin addressed the same situation in the sixteenth century with many French Protestants called Nicodemites. They insisted in remaining in the apostate Romish Church because of the hardships of leaving. Calvin insisted that, in following Jesus Christ, they had to forsake all. “You think the road to heaven is through Geneva,” was the retort of the French Nicodemites. Human nature, even the sinful nature of Christians, has not changed since the 1500s.

Bound to Join will be received, and has been received by some, with similar disdain. Engelsma is well aware of this, of course. He expected opposition,

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and opposition came. Engelsma, the pastor, deals patiently with objections by correspondents who, as Engelsma puts it in the preface, “suffered from a serious [ecclesiastical] malady, but [found that] the medicine was too strong” (x). Writes Engelsma,

As long as Calvin taught the doctrines of the faith, these professing Reformed Christians enthusiastically agreed with him. But when Calvin told them that they were duty-bound, regardless of the cost and of the consequences, to confess these doctrines in and with a true church, they turned on him with ridicule and anger (77).

It is typically a peculiar characteristic of those who hanker after practical preaching to be offended when practical preaching and instruction touch their particular sins and weaknesses!

Feathers are seriously ruffled by “Letter Twelve” where Engelsma applies the calling of church membership to family relationships:

I ask all of you, do you agree that a Reformed man who is married to an unbeliever must join a true church in the area where they live, even though his unbelieving wife opposes it and threatens to leave him, taking the children with her, if he does join? No one may say that this will never confront a Christian. It has confronted many Christians. And the Bible warns that this is a real possibility (81).

But what if one applies this principle even more strictly and consistently? What if there is no church in the area in which one lives? A Christian husband must join a true church in the area in which he lives *or move to an area where there is such a church* “regardless of [his] wife’s hostile reaction” (73); he “may not compromise his faith to save his marriage” (73); a Christian wife must “join and be a lively, faithful member of a true church in the area, regardless of her husband’s disapproval, and even his prohibition” (74). “If the keeping of friendly relations with the blood relative hinders discipleship after Jesus Christ and results in the silence of his or her confession of Christ, one is no disciple of Christ at all” (72-73). If such instruction seems extreme, uncaring, unchristian to the reader, let him remember that Jesus Christ Himself

said that a man must hate and forsake even family for His name's sake (Matt. 19:29; Luke 14:26)!

Conclusion

Bound to Join is the most stirring call to church membership since Calvin's anti-Nicodemite writings were penned in the 1500s. It deserves to be read widely. Let its arguments be considered carefully and prayerfully. Let convenience, personal preferences and family members hinder no believer from joining the true church. For only there the means of grace and salvation are found.

Where Christ is, there must we be. And where Christ is not, because He has left in judgment upon the church's embrace of false doctrine, high-handed corruption of his sacraments, and tolerance of public, impenitent sinners, or the cruel casting-out of the saints for their orthodox confession and righteous lives, there we had better not be either (116).¹

¹ David Engelsma's *Bound to Join: Letters on Church Membership* is available for a special offer price of £8.00 (including P&P) from the CPRC Bookstore (7 Lislunna Road, Kells, N Ireland BT42 3NR or 028 25 891851).