

Soundly Converted: Enchurchment as a Feature of Christian Conversion in Evangelistic Practice

By Zachary Groff

When Joyce stood up and approached the stage at the opposite end of the arena, she knew that her life would never be the same. The evangelist's rousing presentation of God's free gift of salvation in Jesus Christ spoke directly into the hurt, pain, and shame she felt on a daily basis. She wanted to give her life to Christ, and this Thursday night revival meeting was the night. She felt a sense of freedom as she nearly ran to the platform to pray with one of the many men and women wearing dark blue t-shirts emblazoned with the word COUNSELOR across the front and back. Unbeknownst to her, there were other staff workers tallying her as one of that evening's new professions of faith, to be published along with thousands of others as part of the next day's triumphalist "Revival Report." Nevertheless, when anxiety reared its ugly head on the following Lord's Day morning and kept her from attending corporate worship, her contribution to the revivalist's statistics remained unchanged.

Across town, Evan had no idea of what he was getting into when he muted the basketball game on his television to answer the unexpected knock on his front door. A man named Joe from the church around the corner asked him to participate in a survey of the neighborhood's spiritual thinking, and Evan was happy to oblige. After all, Joe seemed nice. He even assured Evan that the survey would take only four minutes, and he stayed true to his word. The questions were so interesting that Evan was interested to hear how Joe would answer the same questions. When Joe finished explaining his convictions and "hope in Christ," Evan knew that he wanted to give this Christ a try. Joe asked him if he would like to receive the gift of eternal life, and Evan eagerly closed his eyes to pray. Afterwards, Joe returned to the church to report back to the rest of the door-to-door team. The evangelists celebrated Evan's profession of faith along with two others in the neighborhood. Meanwhile, Evan

returned to watching the basketball game as he placed the literature from Joe's church on a pile of junk mail on his coffee table. By the end of the week, the brochure was buried under a fresh pile of catalogs and loan refinancing offers.

These two admittedly contrived and overly stereotyped situations illustrate a common problem in today's evangelical church: the conundrum of churchless believers. Well-meaning Christians eager to do the work of evangelism often regard as converted those who are yet to be united to Christ in any visible and consequential manner. One problem in such situations is a conflation of regeneration with conversion. Regeneration is an instantaneous and invisible act, but conversion is an outwardly visible process. Whereas it is impossible for men to detect the act of regeneration itself, conversion necessarily involves outwardly identifiable markers, such as the enchurchment of the converted.

My purpose in this article is to offer a corrective to the common error of regarding churchless believers as sound converts. In the first section, I draw on Scripture to present enchurchment as a feature of Christian conversion. In the second section, I describe theological and historical approaches to evangelism and enchurchment, with a particular focus on the history of American Presbyterianism. In the third section, I propose guidelines for church officers in directing professed believers to pursue membership in the visible church as a necessary feature of conversion. Before progressing into the first section, it is necessary to define three key words in confessional terms as I will be using them in this article.

First, the word "church" used as a technical theological

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term encompasses a spectrum of complementary meanings. In its most general sense, it is to be understood to refer in Thomas Witherow's words to "any society of Christians, however great, or however small."¹ John Murray likewise has described the church as, "the company or society or assembly or congregation or communion of the faithful."² Drawing on Thomas Peck, Ryan McGraw has developed the definition, writing, "The church is, in its basic form, a group of people called out by God from the world to be His people with God dwelling in their midst."³ Each of these definitions describes the church in the most general sense as spiritual and therefore invisible. However, there is an undeniable visible aspect of any society of people. Distinguishing between the invisible and visible church, John Mitchell Mason has explained, "The expression 'church of God,' used without qualification, means an external society comprehending all those who profess the true religion."⁴ In this article, the word "church" primarily refers to the church in its visible aspect, which is described in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) 25.2:

The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.⁵

The use of "church" to refer primarily to the visible church described in WCF 25.2 serves the purpose of presenting enchurchment as a feature of Christian conversion.

The term "enchurchment" quite literally refers to the ingathering of individuals or societies (families, tribes, communities, nations) into the visible church. To undergo enchurchment is to be brought into the church. In relation to the visible church, enchurchment refers specifically to the condition of being brought

into the visible church. *Westminster Confession of Faith* 25.2 stresses the importance of enchurchment in its last clause in reference to the visible church, "out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." The concept of conversion lies immediately behind the words of WCF 25.2.

The term "conversion" in relation to the visible church and enchurchment refers to a change of spiritual condition and standing with observable—or visible—features. Such features are visible by merit of being public and social. They have to do with human society, even though said society is ultimately spiritual in substance, matter, and concern. The *Belgic Confession* captures the social aspect of Christian salvation and conversion in Article 28:

We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it, no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition.

Under the Third and Fourth Head of the *Canons of Dort*, "The Corruption of Man, His Conversion to God, and the Manner Thereof," conversion is more extensively treated as an inward spiritual reality, but the importance of membership in the visible church is assumed throughout. Article 17 concludes this portion of the *Canons* with a clear statement of the relationship between the outward means tending toward inward change of heart (regeneration) and conversion:

Wherefore, as the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them piously instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride, and in the meantime, however, neglected not to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the influence of the Word, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical discipline; so even now it should be far from those who give or receive instruction in the Church to presume to tempt God by separating what He of His good pleasure has most intimately joined together.

In what follows, the word "conversion" relates specifically to outward realities that are necessary—though not sufficient—features and evidences of inward spiritual change. Spiritual change which deserves to be denominated conversion necessarily involves enchurchment in the visible church, "out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (WCF 25.2).

1. Thomas Witherow, *The Apostolic Church - Which Is It?* Second FPP Edition (Glasgow, Scotland: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1856/1990), p. 13.

2. John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1980), p. 33.

3. Ryan McGraw, *The Ark of Safety: Is There Salvation Outside of the Church?* Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), p. 56.

4. John Mitchell Mason, *Essays on the Church of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), p. 13.

5. See also the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (WLC) questions and answers 61–64.

ENCHURCHMENT AS A FEATURE OF CHRISTIAN
CONVERSION

The Bible both explicitly and implicitly presents enchurchment as a necessary feature of conversion. The explicit biblical basis for regarding enchurchment as a necessary feature of conversion includes passages concerning baptism (both commanded and modeled), conversion of masses and individuals, and the thief converted on the cross. Without fail, the New Testament presents baptism as at the heart of the church's evangelistic mission. In Matthew 28:19, Christ explicitly commanded the nascent church made up of His remaining disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."⁶ Baptism in this case is a mark of Christian discipleship, which elsewhere in the New Testament is presented as a necessary feature of church membership. Christ commanded the church to make disciples by means of baptism and teaching—that is, enchurchment—in Matthew 28:19–20.

One possible objection to this reading is that taking "baptizing" and "teaching" as descriptive of the means of making disciples makes one vulnerable to accusations of sacerdotalism in sacramentology and soteriology. On the contrary, being marked and sealed as a member of the visible church by means of baptism is a biblical priority for discipleship, as it is an ordinary means of God's grace for the believer. Baptism need not be the first means introduced to the professing convert. As will be discussed later in this essay, it is wise to test adult claimants to the privileges of divine adoption with a period of catechetical instruction before publicly sealing their membership in the covenant community by means of baptism. However, it is wholly appropriate to signify the visible church membership of believers' children by baptism, thereby publicly inducting them into a lifetime of discipleship by ordinary means. As problematic as sacerdotalism is, such errors are less a danger to sound exegesis on this point than is the too low sacramentology of modern Evangelicalism in which baptism is merely an individual declaration of solidarity with Christ. In fact, baptism signifies the Christian's divinely orchestrated identification and union with Christ through His visible church.

In conversion accounts found in Acts, visible enchurchment by baptism accompanies the preaching of the Word in the ingathering of the Elect. After Peter's Pentecost sermon, the account continues, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). To what were these three thousand souls

added? They were added to the visible church that was expanding under the Apostles' ministry in Jerusalem. Whereas the "three thousand souls" in Jerusalem were exclusively Jews, salvation subsequently came to the Gentiles in the account of the conversion of Cornelius and his household in Acts 10. The Holy Spirit having "fell upon all those who were listening to the message" in 10:44, Peter "ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" in 10:48. Two accounts of household baptism upon the profession of faith of a head of household—Lydia in 16:14–15 and the Philippian jailer in 16:27–34—likewise illustrate the importance of visible enchurchment by baptism as part of Christian conversion. At a more intimate level in the account of the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion found in Acts 8:25–40, the evangelist Philip baptized him (v. 38) before being himself miraculously transported to Azotus (vv. 39–40). Similarly in the account of Saul's conversion to Christ, the scene which opens with Christ's direct auricular and visual revelation ends with Saul regaining his sight, getting up, and receiving baptism as the mark of his membership in the visible church (Acts 9:18). At both the crowd and individual levels, water baptism marking enchurchment is included as a necessary feature of Christian conversion as recorded in the New Testament.⁷

Luke's account of the conversion of the thief on the cross is an apparent exception that proves the rule that visible enchurchment is a necessary feature of Christian conversion. What at first appears to challenge the necessity of visible enchurchment actually serves upon further inspection to strengthen the case for visible enchurchment as a necessary feature of Christian conversion. In Luke 23:39–43, the penitent thief confesses his belief in Christ's sinlessness and calls upon the Name of the Lord in faith. Christ then explicitly receives the thief into the church by the words of His glorious promise in verse 43, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with

6. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from the 1995 edition of the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

7. For general support of this reading of the New Testament data concerning baptism and church membership, see D. Douglas Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church, Historically and Exegetically Considered* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1887), pp. 229–41, 319–27, 364–78; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume 1: Apostolic Christianity, A.D. 1–100* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), pp. 466ff; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975), p. 193; Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume I: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, Second Edition (New York: HarperOne, 2010), p. 112; for a different interpretation, cf. Johannes Weiss, *Earliest Christianity: A History of the Period AD 30–150*, trans. Frederick C. Grant, vol. 1 (New York City: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 50.

Me in Paradise.” Though baptism is conspicuously absent in this case, Christ’s words function as an auricular enchurchment of the man as a necessary feature of his conversion. No sacrament was performed, but the spiritual reality which is normally attached to the sacrament is attested to by none other than the Head of the church Himself. The converted thief was brought into the church by as sure a declaration of enchurchment as has ever accompanied the sacrament of baptism.

Though explicit testimony of Scripture suffices to show the necessity of visible enchurchment as a feature of conversion, the Bible implicitly teaches the same truth. The church’s identity and the church’s ultimate aim necessitate visible enchurchment as a feature of genuine Christian conversion. In Paul’s exhortation to the church in Corinth, he repeatedly emphasized the church’s union with and identity in Christ. Minimizing worldly distinctions, Paul wrote, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.... But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.” (1 Corinthians 12:13, 18). Paul’s relation of baptism to the church’s union with and identity in Christ in the context of a protracted discussion of the operation of the visible community of the saints unavoidably implies that visible enchurchment is a necessary feature of conversion. The Corinthian Christians “were all baptized,” “were all made to drink of one Spirit,” and were placed “each one of them, in the body.” In other words, Paul was reminding his readers that they were made members of the visible church as a necessary feature of their conversion to Christ.

Scripture’s teaching on the church’s ultimate aim of glorifying God likewise suggests the necessity of enchurchment. Proverbs 14:28 asserts, “In a multitude of people is a king’s glory, but in the dearth of people is a prince’s ruin.” This basic principle is applied to God’s kingdom and expanded in New Testament descriptions of God’s glory in the congregation of His redeemed

ones. John’s vision in Revelation 7:9–10 contains powerful imagery of God’s glory in the vastness of His people:

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

In this passage, John visually observes the vast multitude made up of redeemed members of the church triumphant. They are those who have been converted “from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18), having first been called by Christ’s servants into Christ’s church (Romans 10:14–15). The upbuilding of the multitudes of heaven unto the glory of God is the ultimate aim of all evangelism and missions. As John Piper has famously declared, “Missions exists because worship doesn’t.”⁸ The building up of these multitudes is visible on earth in the enchurchment aspect of the conversion of sinners.

ENCHURCHMENT IN HISTORICAL & THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

The history of the church and her theological developments applies the biblical case for enchurchment as a necessary feature of conversion. Following the apostolic period, the fledgling Christian community expanded rapidly across the ancient Mediterranean world, bringing thousands of converts out of paganism and into the church through baptism. Philip Schaff observed that ancient Christians regarded baptism “as the sacrament of the new birth or regeneration, and as the solemn rite of initiation into the Christian Church, admitting to all her benefits and committing to all her obligations.”⁹ However, leaders in the church began to recognize a serious pastoral difficulty in this period of extension beyond the predominantly Jewish-background culture of the earliest converts. Justo González rightly notes that “as the church became increasingly Gentile, it was necessary to require a period of preparation, trial, and instruction prior to baptism.”¹⁰ G. R. Evans describes the situation of early converts who pursued church membership, “The would-be Christian first had to become a catechumen and take instruction.... [Catechumens] were conceived as part of the local church community but not yet really as members, and the preparation for baptism was recognized to be a preparation for the full membership of the church.”¹¹ Ancient church sources

8. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 15.

9. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume 2: Antenicene Christianity, A.D. 100–325* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), p. 253.

10. González, *Story of Christianity I*, 112; see also, Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church of Apostles and Martyrs*, trans. Audrey Butler, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1962), pp. 269, 271f.

11. G. R. Evans, “The Church in the Early Christian Centuries: Ecclesiological Consolidation,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 31.

such as the *Didache*, *The Apostolic Tradition*, and various ante-Nicene treatises describe a rigorous catechetical period of instruction and trial of Christian conduct, lasting up to three years in some cases.¹² The catechumenate system remained in place well into and through the medieval church period.¹³ At the end of the probationary period, the catechumen entered the visible church through baptism. In relation to early Christians' understanding of membership in the church, Wayne Meeks specifies, "baptism was not a preparation for initiation; it *was* the initiation."¹⁴ Through baptism, adult converts with a credible profession of faith in Christ visibly abandoned their outward solidarity and identification with the world and entered the church. Such remains the case today in all manner of Christian (and even pseudo-Christian) churches, including those in the Reformed tradition.

The enchurchment feature of Christian conversion occupies an important place in Reformed treatments of ecclesiology. Not only does church membership render certain practical benefits to congregations and individual Christians, but enchurchment carries great theological significance in the building up of Christ's Kingdom.¹⁵ In the remainder of this section, I give attention to the writings of select Reformed theologians and to certain evangelistic practices of the church over the course of its history. Space limitations disallow anything approaching a comprehensive presentation of Reformed ecclesiology or missiology. Rather, a digest of pertinent Reformed treatments of ecclesiology and soteriology as they pertain to church membership precedes a brief narrative account of the declension of the importance of church membership in modern American Evangelicalism and Presbyterianism. The theological importance of enchurchment lies especially at the nexus of ecclesiology and soteriology. However, emphasis on the enchurchment feature of Christian conversion has demonstrably shaped even certain Reformed interpretations of prophecy regarding the growth and make-up of the church over time. Thus, the place of enchurchment has theological significance for Reformed treatments of eschatology as well. An exploration of the importance of enchurchment in each of these heads of doctrine—soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology—follows below.

The faithful application of Reformed soteriology stresses the importance of individual believers' membership in the visible church. It must be remarked at the outset of a discussion of visible church membership that salvation is by God's grace alone, in Christ Jesus alone. As Thomas Witherow has remarked, "Few would go so

far as to assert that correct views on Church government are essential to salvation."¹⁶ However, Witherow goes on to explain, "the views we adopt upon this subject go far to colour our opinions on matters of Christian faith and practice."¹⁷ At this point, Witherow has struck upon an important insight. Particular enchurchment as expressed in denominational affiliation is important to the content of an individual's faith. Consider the words of nineteenth century Presbyterian pastor T.D. Witherspoon, who exhorted Presbyterian children, "But while you cherish a kindly spirit towards all other branches of the church. . . . [be] decidedly frank in your attachment to Presbyterianism. . . . Let others see that you love the faith and order of the Presbyterian Church, that its doctrines and polity, its history and memories are all dear to your heart."¹⁸ Though a man's membership in one Christian denomination as opposed to another has no bearing on his justification before God, the church of which he is a member certainly influences his theology and in what manner he is being sanctified on the way to glorification through the outworking of God's grace in his life.

The influence of a particular church on an individual believer's theological development reflects the spiritual mission of the church to draw men to Christ even as the church itself is saved by Christ. In his treatment of WCF 25.2's statement concerning the church, "out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation," Ryan McGraw has shown in what ways the Protestant Reformation echoed the teachings of the early Church Father Cyprian (d. A.D. 258) in recognizing the necessity of membership in the visible church for true Christian living. In order to highlight but one important theme from a wide-ranging discussion covering the thought of several Reformers, consider McGraw's observation,

In [Calvin's] view, membership in the church visible was necessary for salvation because preaching, which was

12. Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume 1: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), p. 148.

13. Daniel-Rops, *The Church of Apostles and Martyrs*, 1.269.

14. Wayne A. Meeks, "Social and Ecclesial Life of the Earliest Christians," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity Volume 1: Origins to Constantine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 161.

15. See, for example, Ryan M. McGraw and Ryan Speck, *Is Church Membership Biblical?*, Cultivating Biblical Godliness (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015).

16. Witherow, *The Apostolic Church*, p. 9.

17. Witherow, *ibid.*

18. T.D. Witherspoon, *Children of the Covenant* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873), 143, as quoted in C.N. Willborn, "A Children's Book about God's *Hesed*: T.D. Witherspoon's *Children of the Covenant*," *The Confessional Presbyterian Journal* 14 (2018): 25.

both the primary means of salvation and the primary mark of the church, was attached to the church inseparably.... Like Calvin, Ursinus made membership in both aspects of the church absolute. He also rooted the necessity of membership in the church visible in the inseparable presence of the ministry of the word there.¹⁹

Membership in the church is important because there is no other way to benefit from regular attendance upon the ordinary (visible) means of (invisible) grace—and especially preaching—except through membership and active participation in the visible church. Thus, “since there is one church with visible and invisible aspects, we cannot undermine one without losing the other.”²⁰ It bears repeating at this juncture that the necessity of visible church membership for salvation does not imply sufficiency of such membership for saving union with Christ. “We must neither be content with membership in the visible church without saving union with Christ nor profess that we are members of the invisible church and have no need for the visible church. We must be partakers of the whole Christ and, if at all possible, be so in the context of the whole church.”²¹ In this way only will true believers associate together for the purpose of worship in Spirit and in truth.

Reformed missiologists and theologians concerned with evangelism have noted the importance of the visible church itself for the promotion of God’s glory among men. In so doing, they have highlighted church membership as the instrumental means of the church’s concrete existence as a worshipping community bringing glory to God. In a chapter entitled “God and the Aim of Evangelism,” R.B. Kuiper has delineated four goals for biblical gospel witness, presented in logical order, ascending in scope from immediate to ultimate: the salvation of souls, the growth of Christ’s church, the coming of Christ’s Kingdom, and the glory of God.²² Under the second goal—the growth of Christ’s church—Kuiper

noted, “The Bible puts much stress on the truth that all who receive Christ in faith by that very act become members of Christ’s body, the church.”²³ As the section proceeds, Kuiper explained further what exactly he meant by “receive Christ in faith.”

The fact remains that in the early church converts were invariably and, on their profession of faith, forthwith received by baptism into the fellowship of believers.... The Head of the church not only required of them to unite with the church, He Himself joined them to the church.... The truth of the matter is that church membership is a normal and necessary consequence of salvation.... What, more than aught else, makes the growth of the church meaningful is the fact that it enhances the glory of Christ Jesus, the church’s Head and King.²⁴

Kuiper’s formulation of the Reformed missiological/evangelistic concern for church membership did not appear in a theological vacuum.

In emphasizing the instrumental importance of the growth of the church for the increase of the glory of God in the world, Kuiper was building on a theological foundation laid for him by the great missiologist and theologian of the Dutch Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*), Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676). Summarizing Voetius, twentieth-century missiologist J.H. Bavinck wrote of missionaries, “Why must they be sent? Here Voetius treats the goal of missions, the conversion of the heathen, a goal which is subordinate to the planting of the church (*plantatio ecclesiae*), which is in turn subordinate to the highest aim, the glory of God.”²⁵ Jan Jongeneel has elaborated further on the logic of Voetius’s missiology as situating conversion “as a means to salvation (*salutaris conversio*) in that those who come to faith enter into fellowship with God in Christ and, on the other hand, as a preparation for the more proper work of missions, namely church planting in accordance with the example of the apostles.”²⁶ Both of these independent missiological aims (conversion and church-planting) serve to glorify God, which is the ultimate goal of missions. On Jongeneel’s reading, Voetius argued further that his presentation of biblical missiology was at odds with Roman Catholic thinking on missions, “since Rome does not consider conversion as an independent goal of missions but as a means to the larger purpose of church planting... [which begins] when priests are sent by the universal church to the pagan world,” as opposed to when non-Christians are converted to Christ.²⁷ Though Voetius clearly distinguished between the missiological (and evangelistic) goals of the

19. McGraw, *Ark of Safety*, p. 22ff.

20. McGraw, *ibid.*, pp.82ff.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

22. R.B. Kuiper, *God-Centred Evangelism: A Presentation of the Scriptural Theology of Evangelism* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1966), pp. 106–17.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

25. J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David Hugh Freeman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1960), p. 6.

26. J.A.B. Jongeneel, “The Missiology of Gisbertus Voetius: The First Comprehensive Protestant Theology of Missions,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 26, no. 1 (April 1991): pp. 64ff.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

conversion of the nations (*conversio gentium*) and the planting of the church (*plantatio ecclesiae*), the latter is an undeniably necessary consequence of the former. In other words, missions is not missions if it does not involve evangelism resulting in conversions to the glory of God, leading to church planting producing an increase of the worship of God to the glory of God. Thus, the concrete aims of evangelism and missions as they fit into the mission of the church as a whole (to render true worship to the Triune God) ultimately terminate on the glory of God. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert have articulated this very same idea from a different angle in writing, “If you want to be included in the kingdom of God, you must respond rightly to the King of the kingdom.... The apostles, too, consistently teach that salvation—inclusion in the kingdom of God—is to be had by responding rightly to the King.”²⁸ A necessary component of that right response is membership in the visible church through baptism, resulting in the growth of the visible church to the glory of God. The linkages between evangelism, individual conversion, church membership, church planting, and the increase of God’s glory in the world have eschatological implications which were developed in significant ways in other streams of Reformed theology.

Within the Scottish Presbyterian tradition, the enchurchment feature of Christian conversion has shaped certain biblical commentators’ interpretations of prophecy relating to the ethnic constitution and expansion of the church over time. In commentary material on Paul’s Epistle to the Church in Rome, Scottish Presbyterians such as Charles Ferme (1565–1617),²⁹ David Dickson (1583–1663),³⁰ and John Brown of Wamphray (1610–1679),³¹ shared a common concern for the doctrine of the church which greatly influenced their interpretation of prophecy. This influence is most evident in their comments on the meaning of “all Israel” in Romans 11:26. Brown’s comments are the most developed and worthy of focused consideration here. Commenting on Romans 11:26–27, Brown defined “all Israel” as “the whole body of the nation of the Jews.”³² He qualified this definition by writing, “tho’ there shall be many hypocrites and hollow-hearted professors among them (Ezekiel 20:38), yet all of them are said here to be saved, as being in a fair way for salvation.”³³ Brown built on his inferential reading of Romans 11:11 as indicating that “God had a mind to enchurch [the Jews] again”³⁴ in coming to his conclusion that “shall be saved” in its immediate context means “being in a fair way for salvation.” What does it mean to be “in a fair way for salvation,” and how does this relate to enchurchment? Brown employed two

arguments—one negative and one positive—which together answer these questions. First, Brown had earlier argued that “such as are without the visible church, can have no hope of any of these promises” delivered in Romans 11:4.³⁵ Brown here emphasized the necessity of membership in the visible church for salvation. Second, Brown argued positively in his comments on Romans 11:26–27, “a people under lively and powerful ordinances are in a happier condition than others who live without God and Christ in the world, and so in respect of them may be said to be saved.”³⁶ Thus, Brown reads “shall be saved” in the context of Romans 11:26 as meaning “shall be on a fair way for salvation through the instrumental means of enchurchment.” Brown seems to have expected that the Jewish people would form a national Christian church, and in that sense be saved. In his application of Reformed soteriology to his interpretation of Romans 11:26, John Brown of Wamphray has demonstrated the Reformed emphasis on enchurchment as a necessary feature of Christian conversion. What follows next is a brief exploration of American Evangelical and Presbyterian Churches’ progressive abandonment of the conviction that church membership is an integral feature of what can be regarded rightly as Christian conversion.

As described in this section’s opening paragraph, the practice of the apostolic church emphasized the importance of baptism as the rite of initiation into the church. Adult converts with little-to-no background in the Christian faith underwent a period of instruction and testing to determine the credibility of their profession of faith. Thus, the evangelistic practice of the ancient church reflected church leaders’ keen sense of the importance of church membership in the lives of believers. Not only were church leaders committed to guarding as diligently as possible the membership of the

28. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), p. 135.

29. Charles Ferme, *A Logical Analysis of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, trans. William Skae (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1850).

30. David Dickson, *An Exposition of All St. Pauls Epistles, Together with an Explanation of Those Other Epistles of the Apostles, St. James, Peter, John & Jude: Wherein the Sense of Every Chapter and Verse Is Analytically Unfolded, and the Text Enlightened*. (London: R.I. for Francis Eglesfield, 1659).

31. John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, with Large Practical Observations; Delivered in Several Lectures* (Edinburgh: David Paterson, 1766).

32. Brown, p. 462.

33. Brown, p. 464.

34. Brown, p. 439.

35. Brown, p. 347.

36. Brown, p. 464.

church, but they were equally committed to thoroughly instructing new professors of the Faith unto entrance into the visible church as the consummative sign of their conversion. Over time, medieval church authorities appropriated and transformed the catechumenate system (including baptism) into an instrument of sacerdotalism. Schaff's description of medieval Christianity as "intensely sacramental, sacerdotal, and hierarchical"³⁷ is apt when thinking about the catechumenate during that period. However, as made plain in the Protestant writings and authors cited above, Reformed churches and their ministers have emphasized the biblical mandate of visible church membership as a necessary feature of Christian conversion, and not as a sacerdotal tradition. And yet, this emphasis on membership in the visible church has not gone unchallenged in the history of American Evangelicalism and Presbyterianism.

During the Great Awakening of the early-to-mid eighteenth century, the Spirit of God worked through heart-searching preaching from the likes of George Whitefield (1714–1770) and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) to ignite an unprecedented religious movement throughout the American colonies. This Great Awakening heralded the emergence of American Evangelicalism with its "reliance on a decisive, perceptible experience of conversion."³⁸ Within the nascent Presbyterian Church in the colonies, Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764) rose to prominence as a leader among Presbyterians sympathetic to the ministry of itinerant preachers who were earnest about revival. Tennent inspired controversy within the Presbyterian Church during the Great Awakening, leading to a schism between so-called Old Side and New Side Presbyterians in 1741.

Before the Great Awakening and its attendant controversies, the Presbyterian Church in the American Colonies followed much of European Protestantism in welcoming into the communicant membership of the church two classes of professing Christians: adult

converts upon profession of faith; and, baptized children of believers upon reaching a certain age, learning the doctrinal standards of the Church, and conducting their lives free of any scandal considered worthy of excommunication. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Thomas Murphy described the situation, "It had become customary, as a matter of course, that at a certain age nearly all who had been baptized should be received to the Lord's Supper without giving any evidence of a change of heart. The matter of personal acceptance with God received but little attention. It was considered as almost too sacred a subject to be conversed about."³⁹ Gilbert Tennent called for a reevaluation of the standards for communicant membership, demanding that ministers require candidates for the Lord's Supper to produce an account of their experienced conversion as a proof of their spiritual regeneration. D. G. Hart writes that Tennent purposed "to eliminate nominal Christianity, that is, church goers who simply went through the motions or only had an external awareness of the gospel."⁴⁰ Those who supported Tennent's suggestion came to be known as New Side Presbyterians, with those who rejected Tennent's suggestion being Old Side Presbyterians. Joseph Tracy's description of the two parties to the debate is worth quoting at length.

The Presbyterian Church in America, from its very commencement, contained two classes of men, whose views, on some important points, were in direct conflict with each other. The strict Presbyterians, from Scotland and Ireland, with few exceptions... insisted that all baptized persons, not convicted of heresy or immorality, should be communicants; and that such persons, regularly educated for that purpose, and possessing sufficient learning, should be regarded as qualified for the ministry. Regeneration, they held to be necessary in order to acceptance with God, both in partaking of the Lord's Supper and in performing the duties of the ministry; but a qualification not ascertainable by examination, and not requisite in order to a regular standing in the church, or in a sacred office. In short, they insisted that all should be regarded and treated as regenerate, who did not give evidence to the contrary by manifest heresy or immorality. The other party was composed of men from New England, England, and Wales, with a few from Scotland and Ireland. They held that regeneration is a change of which evidence may ordinarily be found by examination; that those in whom no evidence of regeneration can be found, should be regarded and treated as unregenerate; and that all such persons should be excluded from the Lord's Table, and from the ministry.⁴¹

37. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume 4: Mediaeval Christianity, from A.D. 590–1517* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), p. 436.

38. Baird Tipson, *Inward Baptism: The Theological Origins of Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 172.

39. Thomas Murphy, *The Presbytery of the Log College; or, The Cradle of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1889), pp. 163ff.

40. D. G. Hart, "Old Side / New Side Schism and Reunion," in *Colonial Presbyterianism: Old Faith in a New Land* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2007), p. 164.

41. Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield*, Reprint (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2019), p. 63.

Old Side and New Side Presbyterians divided along synodical lines in 1741, with the former ministering under the auspices of the Synod of Philadelphia and the latter ministering under the auspices of the Conjoint Presbyteries of New Brunswick and Londonderry. In 1746, the Presbytery of New York left the Synod of Philadelphia and joined the Presbyteries of New Brunswick and Londonderry, thus forming the Synod of New York. The two synods labored long to restore unity, and they formally merged in 1758.⁴² The resulting Synod of New York and Philadelphia had settled on the conditions of admittance to the Table and communicant membership: “namely, credible evidence of a change of heart and personal faith in Christ.”⁴³

Throughout this eighteenth century American Presbyterian controversy, ministers on all sides were committed to the idea that membership in the visible church is a necessary feature of Christian conversion. However, the apparent victory of the New Side in the matter of requirements for communicant membership introduced⁴⁴ a criterion for membership in the visible church that would later eclipse the importance of church membership itself for making any judgment as to the spiritual condition of an individual. Whereas this early controversy did not serve as an occasion to weaken American Presbyterians’ commitment to church membership, the causes of the next major controversy in American Presbyterian history included examples of the abuse of visible church membership for the sake of supposed church growth. Such abuse would intractably diminish the seriousness with which individuals regarded church membership.

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, America experienced the Second Great Awakening. During this movement, churches of many different denominations grew rapidly as interest in spiritual matters swelled around the young country. Iain Murray describes the ministry of five especially important evangelistic preachers of the Second Great Awakening—Edward Dorr Griffin (1770–1837), Asahel Nettleton (1783–1844), Lyman Beecher (1775–1863), Edward Payson (1783–1827), and Gardiner Spring (1785–1873)⁴⁵—as holding in common a high standard for determining Christian conversion in line with the New Side Presbyterians of the First Great Awakening. He writes in connection to how these men evaluated the sincerity of new converts’ professions of faith, “true conversion involves a radical break with the principle of sin and self-interest which controls the natural man. To be born of the Spirit is to become ‘spiritual,’ to possess a new nature which loves holiness and conformity to God.... the test is the evidence of moral

transformation.”⁴⁶ Late in the Second Great Awakening, however, certain preachers introduced so-called “New Measures” that sought to guide their hearers to a decision in favor of following Christ and joining the church. Under the ministry of Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875) and others, such measures included the “anxious bench” as the most notorious, but also involved “praying for [unconverted] people by name, visiting towns without invitations from the local preachers, the immediate admission of converts to church membership, protracted nightly meetings, and exhortations by female preachers.”⁴⁷ Such innovative revivalism contributed to a new split in American Presbyterianism, this time between Old School and New School factions, which would last from 1838 to 1869.⁴⁸ The Old School was opposed to the “New Measures,” whereas the New School embraced them for use within the Presbyterian Church. Revivalists who eschewed the circumspection of men such as Griffin, Nettleton, Beecher, Payson, and Spring brought droves of false converts into the visible church by recklessly incorporating the extension of church membership into their revivalism programming. Resistance to these new measures waned as superficial revivalism mixed with instances of true revival through the course of the nineteenth century. Persisting hastiness in bringing individuals into church membership was one of two aftershocks of the Second Great Awakening that weakened the strength of the American Presbyterian Church’s lived doctrine of the church.

As Murray pointedly observes, a second effect of the revivals of the nineteenth century was to inspire “a new readiness among Christians to support wider,

42. For an historical summary of this controversy sympathetic to the Old Side position, see D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2007), pp. 60–69.

43. Murphy, *The Presbytery of the Log College; or, The Cradle of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 180.

44. Some writers specify that the vindication of the New Side position resulted in a reintroduction of an ancient criterion for membership in the visible church; see Tracy, *The Great Awakening*, 427, 431; Iain H. Murray, *Revival & Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750–1858* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1994), p. 106.

45. Murray, *Revival & Revivalism*, pp. 191–222.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

47. Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country*, 112; for a vivid description of the Second Great Awakening’s contribution to American Evangelicalism’s “born-again” character, see Will Hoyt, *The Seven Ranges: Ground Zero for the Staging of America* (Eugene, OR: Front Porch Republic Books, 2021), pp. 56–62.

48. Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country*, 125–27, 164f; cf. Murray, *Revival & Revivalism*, p. 362, which gives 1837–1871 as the range of dates for the Old School–New School division.

non-denominational interests.”⁴⁹ With the concurrent rises of nominal church membership and interest in non-denominational ventures in the latter half of the nineteenth century, further compromise was not far off. Not long after the reunion of the Old School and New School Churches, American Presbyterians would face off against a series of disruptive movements that crossed denominational lines, including the rise of Dispensationalism, the Ecumenical movement, Modernism, Liberalism, Fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism.⁵⁰ Non-denominational, inter-denominational, and independent conferences, meetings, and publications—the precursors to formalized para-church organizations—played important roles in each of these movements and the controversies related to them. However, the full flower of para-church ministry was yet to bloom.

By the middle of the twentieth century, para-church ministry was well-positioned to make inroads into the hearts, minds, schedules, and purses of American Christians. New media technologies, celebrity culture, and the proliferation of the automobile resulted in a waning of the social and cultural importance of local church ministry. In place of local denominational ministries emerged para-church organizations (including for-profit publishing houses), televised megachurches, and annual conferences that captured the hearts, minds, and attentions of believers around the country. Though the particular references are now a bit dated, Hart and Muether’s snapshot description of para-church organizations vividly illustrates the competition such groups pose to the church.

When the average American Protestant can listen to James Dobson nightly on the radio, follow the advance of Billy Graham’s crusades through *Decision* magazine, meet with local Christians to study a book of the Bible organized around a study published by Zondervan, and listen to any number of Christian recording artists

during his or her commute to and from work, it is easy to see how the efforts of a Presbyterian denomination, let alone the meager resources of the average Presbyterian congregation, can hardly keep up.⁵¹

How has the pivot to para-church ministries affected American Christianity as it relates to visible church membership? There are three trends worth considering here that relate to conversion and church membership.

In the first place, the increased popularity of para-church ministries and organizations correlates to a change in the way American Evangelicals—including Bible-believing Presbyterians—share the gospel with their neighbors, friends, coworkers, family members, and acquaintances. Most evangelism techniques employed by para-church groups are concerned with producing a “decision for Christ” either immediately in the context of an on-the-spot conversation or over time in the context of a long-term relationship cultivated between the evangelist and the unbelieving conversation partner. While there is not anything inherently sinful in deciding to follow Jesus, the counsel that follows such a decision may or may not involve either the convert’s trial of his profession or his subsequent enchurchment. In other words, the evangelistic conversation or relationship leading to a decision has functionally replaced the catechetical process of instruction and trial leading to enchurchment. In its worst forms, such evangelism simultaneously downplays the importance of membership in the visible church and lends legitimacy to the false theology of decisional regeneration. Even at its best, such an approach to evangelism has promoted both individualism and methodophilia (i.e., love of particular methods or techniques) in American Evangelicalism. Both tendencies—individualism and methodophilia—are disastrous for Christian living. Sinclair Ferguson writes, “Being a Christian involves *believing*.... But being a Christian is not an individualistic or isolationist activity. *Believing* also involves *belonging*.... Being a Christian, by definition, involves belonging to the church—that, in turn, means belonging to a particular church.”⁵² Os Guinness strongly warns against attachment to particular techniques in matters of evangelism and Christian persuasion, “Technique is the devil’s bait for the Christian persuader today, and at point after point we must turn down its seductions point blank, just as Jesus refused the tempter in the desert.”⁵³ The Christian evangelist’s abandonment of biblical instruction leading to enchurchment in favor of presentational techniques leading to an individual “decision

49. Murray, *Revival & Revivalism*, 360; see also Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country*, pp. 172–78.

50. For a masterful historical treatment of the development of American Evangelicalism and Presbyterianism in the period following the Old School–New School controversy, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture, The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

51. Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country*, p. 260.

52. Sinclair Ferguson, *Devoted to God’s Church: Core Values for Christian Fellowship* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2020), p. 1.

53. Os Guinness, *Fool’s Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), p. 30.

for Christ” dovetails into a second effect on American Christians’ beliefs and attitudes toward formal membership in the visible church.

Concurrent to the rise of the popularity of para-church organizations committed to evangelism and discipleship (functions historically belonging to the church alone), ecclesiastical innovations have included the creation of new denominations and church networks that eschew or otherwise reimagine church membership. The proliferation of non-denominational churches, groups, and networks that resemble para-church organizations while purporting to bring new approaches to “doing church” characterizes American Evangelicalism today. Some groups—such as Calvary Chapel⁵⁴—entirely forsake visible church membership. Christianity Today recently reported, “For a growing number of churches, membership has been deemphasized (if not eliminated altogether) as they try to become more relevant to a younger generation that places less emphasis on attachment to institutions.”⁵⁵ Other inter-denominational networks—such as the global Acts29 Network,⁵⁶ the Redeemer City to City Network⁵⁷ in major metropolitan areas around the world, and the Liberti network of churches in southeast Pennsylvania⁵⁸—bring together churches from a variety of otherwise unaffiliated associations and denominations for the purpose of cooperative church-planting, outreach, and branding/marketing efforts within their geographical footprint. In both cases, some feature of church life other than visible membership in a particular congregation or denomination (i.e., church) is presented as the instrument of the community’s unified witness to and mission in the world. Ostensibly, a spiritual commitment to Jesus Christ is that which unites individual believers in churches such as Calvary Chapel. However, the detachment of a spiritual commitment to Christ from a visible association with a particular expression of His church is at odds with the biblically reasoned practice of the church throughout history. In the case of inter-denominational or non-denominational church networks and groups, individuals retain visible church membership in congregations that put extra-ecclesiastical (rather than denominational) associations in the foreground. The de-emphasis on membership in a particular visible expression of the church may be less direct in this case, but the result is nonetheless a reimagining of what it means to be a member of a particular denomination. Insofar as such networks engage with Presbyterian congregations, they have introduced a new manner of being a member in a Presbyterian church. A third trend

in American Evangelicalism has to do with matters of Christian identity and church membership in hostile or otherwise sensitive cultural contexts.

In Presbyterian circles, advocates for so-called Insider Movements and Side B Gay Christianity have misunderstood and confused the radical change that takes place in conversion. Proponents of Insider Movements and Side B Gay Christianity have reimagined the place and function of conversion in the Christian life for the sake of reaching closed social groups. Those who encourage Insider Movements advise converts to Christianity to remain in their native-born socioreligious communities as full members (whatever that looks like in each particular case) while seeking to ‘live faithfully’ as followers of Christ in those communities.⁵⁹ This approach necessarily restricts such converts from outwardly expressing their membership in the body of Christ, thus removing them from full participation in the life of the church (e.g., ordinary means of grace, church discipline, sacraments). In other words, proponents of Insider Movements have redefined what it means to convert to Christianity—to be a Christian—having removed membership in a particular expression of Christ’s body (i.e., the church) from the definition. On the other hand, some proponents of Side B Gay Christianity adopt labels such as “gay,” “Side B,” or “LGBTQ+”

54. For an example of one Calvary Chapel affiliate pastor’s understanding of church membership, see David Guzik, “Is Church Membership Biblical?,” *Enduring Word*, accessed August 19, 2021, <https://enduringword.com/is-church-membership-biblical-live-with-pastor-david/>.

55. Ryan P. Burge, “1 in 10 Non-Church Members Still Show Up Every Sunday,” *Christianity Today*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/august/church-membership-gallup-survey-attendance-christians.html>.

56. “Home,” *Acts 29*, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://acts29.com>.

57. “About,” *Redeemer City to City*, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://redeemercitytocity.com>.

58. See the response to the seventh Frequently Asked Question here: “Who We Are,” *Liberti*, accessed August 19, 2021, <https://liberti.org/who-we-are.2021>, <https://liberti.org/who-we-are>.”plainCitation”:”See the response to the seventh Frequently Asked Question here: “Who We Are,” *Liberti*, accessed August 19, 2021, <https://liberti.org/who-we-are>.”noteIndex”:57,”citationItems”:[{“id”:615,”uris”:[“http://zotero.org/users/2589365/items/626QV2U9”],“uri”:[“http://zotero.org/users/2589365/items/626QV2U9”],“itemData”:{“id”:615,”type”:.“webpage,”“container-title”:.“Liberti,”“language”:.“English,”“title”:.“Who We Are,”“URL”:.“https://liberti.org/who-we-are,”“accessed”:[“date-parts”:[["2021",8,19]]]”},“prefix”:.“See the response to the seventh Frequently Asked Question here.”}],“schema”:.“https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”}

59. PCA Ad Interim Study Committee on Insider Movements (SCIM), “A Call to Faithful Witness, Part Two: Theology, Gospel Missions, and Insider Movements” (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), March 19, 2014), pp. 2213–33.

when describing their experienced Christian identity.⁶⁰ They regard their sinful desires, affections, and inclinations as neutral social or cultural markers that can be brought together with their Christian commitment and identity. In so doing, they aim to accomplish two things. They hope to express themselves and their shared experiences as Christians who harbor deviant sexual desires of a homosexual nature, and they hope to retain their access to dearly beloved friends who continue to live under the life-dominating sin of deviant sexual lusts and affections. Like those who build Insider Movements, so-called “Side B Gay Christians” have nurtured a community within—and in some ways, apart from—the visible church as expressed in local congregations. By employing words such as “gay” or “homosexual” to modify their Christian identity, they evacuate the terms of their moral weight, redefining them as categories comparable to ethnic, social, or cultural markers that are not inappropriate to append to “Christian.” Like the development of Insider Movements, this too confuses the nature and extent of conversion. In contrast to the message of Insider Movements and Side B Gay Christianity, converts must renounce all sinful features of their previous life (e.g., inborn sin nature, sinful affections, thoughts, words, deeds, customs, or commitments) upon being born again from above to live in submission

60. See Colin Smothers, “Challenging ‘Gay Christian’ Identity,” CBMW, August 23, 2019, <https://cbmw.org/2019/08/23/challenging-gay-christian-identity/>; see also, Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationships Shaped by God’s Grand Story* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2018), pp. 7–72, 185–95; PCA Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality, “Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality to the Forty-Eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (2019–2020)” (Lawrenceville, GA: Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), May 2020).

61. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Third Edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), p. 158.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

63. Take for example Roger S. Greenway’s edited volume, *The Pastor-Evangelist* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publications, 1987), which contains passing references to enchurchment of new converts in only two places: pages 119 and 136. Likewise, longtime InterVarsity Christian Fellowship campus minister Will Metzger’s popular and helpful manual for evangelism, *Tell the Truth*, Fourth Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), contains merely two statements (within one passage) of how evangelistic workers must encourage new Christians to be involved in a local church on pages 230 and 231. The author does not give an extended treatment of the subject of enchurchment in earlier sections of the book where it would have been extremely useful, including those detailing “Genuine Conversion” and “Worship: The Whole-Souled Response to Grace.”

64. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, p. 62. see also earlier discussion under the section headed, *Enchurchment in Historical and Theological Development*.

and reliance upon Christ as members of His glorious body, the church. Both Insider Movements and Side B Gay Christianity have emerged as major theological crises within Evangelical and Presbyterian circles in the opening two decades of the 21st Century, either instigated or aggravated by over 150 years of assaults on biblical ecclesiology and the place of conversion and enchurchment in the extension of the church. Having canvassed recent developments in church history, it is appropriate to consider ways to address the problems highlighted above.

ENCHURCHMENT GUIDELINES FOR CHURCH OFFICERS
Recent popular manuals for evangelism and church vitality have detached discussions of enchurchment and church membership from directions for evangelism, where the former is discussed at all. As Mark Dever has remarked, “Any church growth specialist would tell me that inviting people to join a church is exactly the wrong thing to do today.”⁶¹ Yet as Dever points out, “Church membership does not save, but it is a reflection of salvation. And if there is no reflection of our salvation, how can we be sure that we are truly saved?”⁶² In other words, enchurchment is a necessary feature of conversion. The present lacuna of literature explicitly handling enchurchment as a necessary feature of conversion is as prevalent in self-consciously Reformed publications as it is in more broadly Evangelical literature of the latter half of the twentieth century and opening decades of the twenty-first century.⁶³ This is a problem because, as Scripture makes clear, the enchurchment of multitudes of the peoples of the earth for the worship of God is part and parcel of the church’s “mission.”⁶⁴

The church’s approach to enchurchment must be neither careless nor uniform. The most heinous example of recent carelessness in extending church membership to those who made hasty professions of faith comes from the Second Great Awakening, mentioned in the previous section of this article. A less obviously condemnable practice is the well-intentioned normalization of programmatic new members’ classes for each and every person that expresses interest in church membership in a particular local congregation. To avoid sterile and lazy uniformity in the practice of bringing individuals and families into the membership of the local congregation, church officers should work with newly professed believers according to their prior relationships with church members and leaders. Whether new believers are known or unknown to the church should have a bearing on how they are brought into the communion of the saints.

Church officers can consider new believers to be “known” if they have been attending to the means of grace (namely, the reading and preaching of the Word of God in stated worship services) for a period of time, and if they possess established friendships or family relationships with mature Christians, and particularly with members of the congregation into which the new believers are to be received. In this situation, there may not be a need to require enrollment in a visitors’ or new members’ class. An interview with the church’s elders may be sufficient (it is certainly necessary) to confirm a sound profession of faith. Having been brought into the church’s membership, the “known” new believer should be integrated into the full-orbed life of the church, and particularly into its corporate worship gatherings, regular prayer meetings, and regimen for pastoral visitation. At this point, the church’s new members’ class may be helpful for strengthening the familiarity and understanding of the church and its doctrine that the “known” new believer already possesses (as tested by the elders). The benefit to following these general guidelines is twofold. First, the sincere new believer is not unnecessarily kept out of the visible church, and deprived of its unique benefits (most obviously, the sacraments and church discipline). This follows apostolic practice as reflected in Acts 2:41 and elsewhere, as detailed in the first section of this article. Second, the pastors and elders of the church can safely regard the new believer as a candidate for leadership training or—less felicitously—can appropriately employ church discipline in their oversight and care.

Church officers should consider new believers to be “unknown” if they express interest in church membership soon after being presented with the gospel through contact evangelism, a door-to-door campaign, street ministry, open-air preaching, or other such confrontational—though warranted and useful—forms of gospel witness. When such earnest “unknown” new believers approach the church, there must be a clear and rigorously guarded path to church membership laid out before them. The most important element of their journey to membership in the visible church is thorough catechetical instruction designed to impress a broad outline of biblical truth upon their hearts. Possible components of such catechetical instruction might include systematic Bible reading plans, interactive study guides through particular books of the Bible and historic creeds of the Christian faith, catechism memorization, and consistent church attendance, and one-on-one discipleship. Church elders should determine the exact

parameters of required catechetical instruction to accomplish more than the mere transmission of information over a span of a few weeks. As noted above, early church practice involved rigorous instruction and testing of new Gentile (“unknown”) believers before admitting them into church membership through baptism. Reformed churches today would do well to take note of the due diligence reflected in such a process.

Scripture makes clear that church officers are responsible to protect the table from unworthy partakers of the Lord’s Supper. Consider Paul’s words to unworthy partakers in 1 Corinthians 11:27–28, where he warned, “Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But a man must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” It is incumbent upon elders in Christ’s church to issue this solemn warning by fencing the table and diligently instructing new believers. A sincere believer will be eager to partake, but will patiently acquiesce to every biblical measure which his prospective elders take to ensure his good and God’s glory in the proper administration of the Lord’s Supper.

CONCLUSION

Three years, two jobs, and four failed attempts at dating after she gave her life to Christ at that Thursday night revival meeting, Joyce finally made her way to a Sunday morning church service not too far from her house. Grace Presbyterian Church sounded nice to her ears. She definitely felt like she needed grace, if nothing else. The pews were not particularly comfortable, the carpets must have been at least thirty years old, and the preacher was kind of pudgy. He was preaching on King Jesus’s discipleship mandate from Matthew 28:16–20, and the emphasis he put on the abiding presence of Christ in and with His disciples-as-the-church-called-to-build-the-church captured Joyce’s attention. After the service, she approached an older woman in the congregation and asked her what membership “looked like,” because she “really wanted to try it out.” The wise elder sister in the faith smiled and invited her to come with her to talk it over with the pastor, which Joyce was glad to do.

Two pews behind Joyce, Evan was greeting another visitor to the church. He had begun attending two weeks after Joe - one of the elders at Grace - shared the gospel with him three years ago. Joe was not content with a mere profession of faith. He returned to Evan’s house that following Sunday afternoon after missing him in

worship, and gently encouraged him to test his newly professed faith by pursuing gospel instruction in a faithful local church. Evan had not missed a Sunday since Joe made clear to him that communion with the saints is an aspect of genuine conversion to Christ. He has been an active member in the church for over two years, and has even accompanied Joe on door-to-door campaigns in the neighborhood.

As made clear in these two stories, church officers and evangelistic workers must not count as converts those who instantly profess faith in response to some prompt, be it a revivalist's message or one-on-one gospel presentation. Though regeneration is a mysterious, invisible, and instantaneous work of the Spirit of God, conversion is an outwardly visible process ordained by the Father, modeled by the Son, and superintended today by the Spirit working in concert with the Word preached, read, and taught in the church. Ministers and lay evangelists must intentionally aim at enchurchment in their labors as "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17). Not only does God in Christ mandate it by precept and example, but it is woven into the warp and woof of biblical teaching on faith, repentance, the church, and its sacraments.

A holistic strategy for enchurchment of both "known" and "unknown" new believers is biblical, wise, and useful. Such a strategy is especially important when ministering to men, women, and families in communities of life-dominating idolatry such as Islam, Hinduism, materialistic communalism, a cult, and homosexuality. If biblical modes of evangelizing people from such totalitarian competitors of Christianity are not worked out and defined, the church is likely to make the mistake of adopting aberrant approaches such as the promotion of Insider Movements and Side B Gay Christianity. Even when the field of view is restricted to nominal Christians from other recognizably Christian church bodies, American Presbyterian categories for receiving members (by transfer, profession of faith, or reaffirmation of faith) reflect the need for and usefulness of different approaches to engrafting believers into the church, sensitive to different situations. As part of the nurture of spiritual babes in Christ, elders must frame plans for enchurchment and catechesis of professing believers who are more or less known by the church. Not to do so is to ensure the production of half-baked "converts" who possess only a vain hope in a Christ they have yet to encounter in His fullness. ■



W. H. Davenport, American, 19th century, *The Country Church—Before Service, Sunday Morning*, From *Harper's Weekly*, 1868.