

99

# WHICH CHURCH Shall I Join?

By  
MARTIN S. SOMMER

Fifth Printing

Concordia Publishing House  
St. Louis, Mo.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
LIBRARY

## Which Church Shall I Join?

By MARTIN S. SOMMER

"How can I be expected to choose the right Church when so many, each differing from the others, present their claims and everyone of them insists on being right? There are so many denominations, each of which claims to be the right one, that it becomes impossible to decide which deserves our confidence."

Arguments such as these are used by many to excuse their remaining away from all churches. They say: "If learned and sincere men, who have studied these questions all their lives, cannot come to an agreement, how can an ordinary person arrive at a satisfactory conclusion?"

"There is the Roman Catholic Church, which claims to be the only saving Church. There is the Greek Catholic Church, which claims to be the oldest Church, because it has congregations in the territory first of all occupied by the apostles themselves: Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Athens, etc. And then there are the Methodists, the Baptists, the Episcopalians, the Reformed, the Dutch Reformed, the Campbellites, the Latter Day Saints, the Holy Rollers, the Church of God, and the Mormons. And among these there are subdivisions. How can an ordinary person even examine all these denominations? How can we, therefore, make an intelligent choice?"

But, after all, the situation is not at all as desperate as it looks.

[2]

Remember that there are puzzling questions also concerning medicine and cures; there are puzzling questions concerning education; there are very puzzling questions concerning money matters; and yet we call a physician, we send a child to school, and we invest our money.

It will not do to grow discouraged simply because a problem looks difficult.

The only right thing to do when we face difficulties is to begin at the right place and go on step by step, one step at a time. The unraveling of a tangled skein may seem a hopeless task; but if you begin at the right thread and follow that, disentangling it slowly, little by little, you will be successful. It is just so with this question, *Which Church shall I join?* In order to solve this problem, you must begin at the right place.

1. The first thing to be settled is a very simple matter. Each one must, first of all, answer this question, *Am I to be honest in this matter, or am I to be a hypocrite?* You certainly can easily answer that question. If you have determined to be no hypocrite, but to be sincere, you have made one step in the right direction. All upright and sincere people agree with us that no one is to believe one thing at heart and confess another thing with his mouth. You are not to be a Roman Catholic at heart and outwardly join the Lutheran Church. You are not to be a Lutheran at heart and outwardly join the Catholic Church. You are not to be an Episcopalian at heart and join the Baptist Church. You are not to join a Church whose teachings you do not accept. Certainly, every

upright and honest person will agree with us in this.

2. Now, if that is settled, you may proceed to the next step, which necessarily follows upon the first, namely, you must answer the question Am I a Christian at all? God wants no one outwardly to join the Church till he has inwardly become a member of it. In the very first history of the first Christian congregation we are told that "believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women," Acts 5:12. When at one time an unbeliever wanted to join the Church, Peter said to him, "Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter; for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent, therefore, of this thy wickedness and pray God if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee," Acts 8:21, 22.

God does not want a person to call himself a Christian and a member of the Christian Church unless he is a true Christian at heart, for the Bible expressly tells us that "the Lord looketh on the heart," 1 Sam. 16:7. Therefore one question for you to settle is this: Am I a true Christian? And however unlearned you may be, you can become sure whether you are a Christian or not, because the Bible pictures to us a Christian so exactly and faithfully that everyone may examine himself and become sure whether he is a Christian or not.

The Bible mentions three things that are found in every Christian. First, every Christian acknowledges himself to be a sinner, who has deserved God's wrath and displeasure. A person who is not willing to confess him-

self to have sinned and to have deserved God's punishment is a deluded child of Satan; for the Bible expressly tells us: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His Word is not in us," 1 John 1:8-10.

In the second place, every Christian is very sorry that he is a sinner and very much ashamed of it. David, and Peter, and the publican, and Paul, and many others have confessed their sins with shame and contrition. They and all Christians were ashamed of their filth and uncleanness and prayed God: "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity and cleanse me from my sin," Ps. 51:2. Jesus expressly said to all men: "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish," Luke 13:5.

The third thing which we find in every Christian is that he believes that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin, as the Bible expressly teaches: "The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sin," 1 John 1:7. And in this same epistle St. John writes: "He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life," 1 John 5:12. And Jesus taught the same truth when He said to Nicodemus: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life," John 3:16. If you are a true Christian, these three things are also found in

you, and you should join other Christians. Inwardly you have already joined Christ's holy Church; you should therefore also outwardly show that you belong to this Church by joining with other Christians who teach these truths.

Now these two things have been settled: In this matter of joining the Church you are not to act as a hypocrite, you are not to join one Church while believing the other Church to be right, and you are not to join any Church unless you are a Christian at heart.

3. You may now ask the third question, May I not be a Christian without joining any Church? Jesus Himself answers this question when He tells us: "But whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven," Matt. 10:33. And the Apostle Paul writes: "Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord nor of me, His prisoner; but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the Gospel according to the power of God," 2 Tim. 1:8.

You certainly are not to do what Peter did, who denied his Lord. Peter was so ashamed of this denial of his Savior that he wept bitterly over it. Even respectable men of the world despise a coward. Of the chief rulers of the Jews it is said: "Nevertheless, among the chief rulers also many believed on Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him lest they should be put out of the synagogue. For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God," John 12:42, 43. What? Is it possible for a person to be convinced of Jesus' power, deity, love,

and mercy and yet to be ashamed to confess the truth which Jesus teaches? Certainly every true Christian sings with all his heart:

Ashamed of Jesus! that dear Friend  
On whom my hopes of heaven depend!  
No; when I blush, be this my shame,  
That I no more revere His name.

Ashamed of Jesus! Yes, I may  
When I've no guilt to wash away,  
No tear to wipe, no good to crave,  
No fears to quell, no soul to save.

Till then — nor is my boasting vain —  
Till then I boast a Savior slain;  
And oh, may this my glory be,  
That Christ is not ashamed of me!

It is true, there always are some who would escape trouble by remaining neutral. But Jesus has positively told us that neutrality in the warfare between Him and His enemies is impossible. He has said: "He that is not with Me is against Me, and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth," Luke 11:23. The proper conduct here is presented to us by that great servant of God in the Old Testament, Moses. Of Moses we read: "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt, for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward," Heb. 11:24-26.

That settles our third question whether one may be a Christian secretly. God has expressly told us that we are to confess Him publicly and join with those who confess His name before the world.

4. But the chief question still remains. Since there are any number of denominations, which one of these should a true Christian join? Tell me, whence did you learn these precious truths through which you have become a Christian? You will quickly answer me, I have learned all this from the Word of God, from the Bible. And you are certainly right about that; for there is no other book, and in all nature there is nothing, that can teach you these truths except the Bible. You learned those precious truths which we have spoken of in the former paragraphs from the Bible and from nowhere else. And if this is sure (as it certainly is), then our chief difficulty is overcome, and you are very close to the solution of your whole problem; for Jesus Himself now tells you just what you, who sincerely believe in Him, are to do. In the 8th chapter of John we read: "Then said Jesus to those *which believed on Him*: If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." By accepting Jesus as your Savior because the Bible offers Him to you, you have shown how great is your confidence in the Word of the Bible; for you are, so to say, staking your whole welfare for time and eternity upon what that Book says. You are saying: "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness," and you are willing to die in this faith. If you were mistaken, you could never correct the mistake, because no one can die the second time if he was mistaken in his faith the first time. Therefore one who accepts what the Bible says about Jesus Christ and His suffering for our sins

and confesses this faith and dies in this faith, such a one shows that he had unlimited confidence in this Word and that he believes and trusts with all his heart in what the Bible says. How can such a one reject any express teaching of the Holy Scriptures? *If you are willing to rest your whole welfare for time and eternity upon the Word which you have learned from the Bible, should you, then, not accept everything that is in the Bible?*

The truths which you have learned concerning Jesus are wonderful truths, which no mind of man could ever have invented. The wisest of men tried for thousands of years, through their philosophy and wisdom, to find out the correct answers for religious questions; but they failed, as the best of them confessed. The Bible therefore also states: "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe," 1 Cor. 1:21. The exact truth concerning God and eternity God had to reveal to us Himself, and He did that here in the holy Bible. Here you have those heavenly, supernatural truths which you have accepted by faith, according to your own confession. And trusting the words of this holy Book, you have committed to the Lord Jesus Christ your most precious possessions, your soul and your welfare, for all eternity. You say with St. Paul: "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that Day," 2 Tim. 1:12. And in this very confidence which you have in God's Word there is for you the solution of your question, Which Church am I to join?

*You are to join those Christians or that Church where you are given the open Bible, where you are invited to read it, to study it, and to follow its express words.*

But you say, Do not all churches offer me that? Certainly not! If you will be bold and take hold of the matter, you will soon see that not all churches offer you the open Bible and bid you abide by its words. Let us take up a number of the most prominent of these churches. There is, for instance, the Roman Catholic Church. It is well known that it does not distribute the open Bible to its people, nor does it invite them to read the plain, simple words of Scripture without comment. The Roman Catholic Church tells you that you are to follow the words of the Pope, whether these words are in agreement with what you see in the Bible or not. And we know that the Pope's words are not always in agreement with the words of the Bible. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He told His disciples that everyone who partakes of the Sacrament should also drink of the cup. Four times these words of His are recorded in the Scripture: "Drink ye all of it." The Roman Catholic Church expressly and explicitly contradicts this word of Christ and tells its people that they are not all to drink of the cup, but that only the officiating priest is to drink from the cup. A great number of other instances could be mentioned in which the Roman Catholic Church contradicts the very word of the Bible. But one is sufficient.

If you wish to have more proofs that the Roman Catholic Church contradicts the Word of God, send to Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo., for Tract No. 43, *Why I am a Protestant.*

There is the Baptist Church. It forbids its members to baptize infants, whereas the Word of God expressly commands us to baptize *all nations*, and no one has ever found a nation without infants. The Bible expressly states: "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God *as a little child*, he shall not enter therein." Whereas the Bible states that adults must become as little children before they can become Christians, Mark 10:15, the Baptists teach that infants must first grow up before they can be converted.

There is the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist, the Campbellite, the Congregational, and a number of other churches, which all contradict Jesus' word where He says: "This is My body." We are expressly told that whoever takes the Sacrament unworthily becomes "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord," of which he could not become guilty if the body and blood were not there. Yet these churches declare that the body and blood of Christ are not taken with the mouth. Just so the Episcopal and the Evangelical churches permit their ministers to teach contrary to the Word of God on this and other matters.

Now take the confessions of the Lutheran Church, for instance, the Small Catechism. You will not be able to point to one single teaching of this Catechism or of the other Confessions of the Lutheran Church which contradicts any truth of God's Word. The Lutheran Church has avoided the fads and nonsense of many sects, which follow the changes of public opinion on Sabbatarianism, immersionism, apostolic succession, emotional revivalism, and other crudities. The loyal

Lutheran Church does not allow Rationalists and errorists and Modernists to defile and disgrace its pulpits. By joining the Lutheran Church, you will do what He whom you call your Lord and Master tells you to do: "Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned and avoid them," Rom. 16:17. Therefore, if you are a sincere Christian and wish to have no other Lord than Jesus, then you ought to join the Lutheran Church.

But one may say, "Do we not honor Luther too highly by being called by his name, *Lutherans*? I do not wish to be called after any man." In answer to this let me remind you that Lutherans have not given themselves this name. *Your* name may be John, or Mary, or Charles, or Charlotte, or some other name; you did not give yourself that name, others gave it to you. You are simply known by that name, and why should you change it? After all, what difference does it make whether you are called John, or Charles, or Charlotte, or Mary? That is simply a label by which you are to be known. Just so the name of the Church is simply a label to distinguish that Church from others. And now it so happens that by the providence of God and because men have called them so, those people who in every particular are faithful to the Word of God and are guided in all things by the words of the Lord Jesus are known as Lutherans or Evangelical Lutherans. We are certainly not going to give up the truth for the sake of a name. And we are not going to hesitate to fellowship those who are sincere followers of Christ because the name is not

exactly what we prefer. *Let the name be what it will, we Christians want the reality.* Of the true sheep of Christ, Jesus Himself says: "My sheep hear My voice." And every true Lutheran does this; he hears and proclaims the Word of Jesus.

Now, before we finish, let me repeat to you: The first question for you to settle is not which outward Church you are to join, but this, Am I a Christian or not? For outward church membership, though you join the very best Church on this earth, is not going to take you to heaven. If nothing further comes of it, outward church membership is not going to benefit you one whit; in fact, if you are a member of a Church and not a Christian at heart, you will receive the greater condemnation. When, therefore, you are confronting this question, let this be your first concern, Am I a true Christian? Ask yourself, Have I recognized and acknowledged my transgression before the Lord? Have I accepted Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God, who died for my sins, and am I sincere and upright in calling Jesus Lord? And am I showing that He is my Lord by actually following His words as God gives me grace? If you can honestly give an affirmative answer to these questions, then you certainly ought to attend that church, and that church only, where the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity. You ought certainly not to encourage that minister or that congregation which calls itself Christian, has a Bible in the pulpit or on the altar, and then from this holy place contradicts the very words of Christ and leads people away from Christ's Word instead of

feeding Christians with Christ's Word. If you are sincere and detest lies, then you ought to be sure that the worst lies that are told on this earth are those lies that are told in the pulpit.

Do not say, "Oh, it makes no difference to what Church you belong as long as you are sincere. It does not make so much difference what you believe as long as you lead a good life and love your neighbor and are true." By saying that, you contradict Jesus, who tells us that it makes all the difference in the world what you believe. He tells us in His Word: "*Without faith it is impossible to please God,*" Heb. 11:6. He has said: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned," Mark 16:16. He has said: "If ye believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins," John 8:24. He has told us that, though our lives have been sinful, faith in Him, our Savior, will wash these sins away, Is. 1:17. And He has told us at the same time that, no matter what your life may be, if you do not believe in the Savior, you will be damned. And damnation is no small matter; it is the very worst that can come upon a man.

Even in earthly things it makes a great difference what a person believes. Not one of us knows by his own experience who his father or mother is. We believe that these are our parents because we have been told so upon what is to us sufficient testimony. But it certainly makes a great difference to us whether we are convinced, This man is my father, this woman is my mother, or whether we are in doubt about that. It makes a great

difference whether we believe of another person that he is loyal and upright or whether we believe that he is deceitful at heart and that he is evilly disposed toward us. And just so in religion it makes all the difference in the world what you believe about God and whether you believe that the death of Jesus upon the cross is the measure of God's love for you (John 3:16) or whether the death of Jesus upon the cross simply shows you what a man can suffer for his testimony.

Once more, then, which Church are you to join? You are to join no Church till you are a Christian; and if you are a Christian, then you are to join that Church which teaches God's Word in its truth and purity; and you may easily discover which that Church is, according to the explanation which we have given above, and by testing the teaching of the Church by the Word of God.

If you say, I am not capable of making this test, then remember that even the early Christians, who did not have the opportunity which you have of becoming acquainted with God's Word, even *they* were able to judge whether the apostles spoke God's Word or not, Acts 17:11. The Bible is not a book of puzzles; the Bible, in those things which we need to know, is very plain and simple. When God says: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," there is nothing uncertain, ambiguous, or doubtful about these words. If we tell a child of six years that God made heaven and earth, he understands it as well as we do; and again, when we are told in the Lord's Supper that every one is to drink of the cup, that is not a difficult



question, that is not a puzzle, that is very plain and simple. And again, when God tells us that we are to beware of false teachers and expressly says, "*Avoid them*" (Rom. 16:17), He is not offering us a puzzle or giving us a perplexing, indefinite command, but He commands us to do that which any Christian can follow. Just so in other important matters, the Bible is very plain and simple in its statements, and instead of misleading us, it has always led people aright. "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path," Ps. 119:105. "The entrance of Thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple," Ps. 119:130.

---

File  
45