**Round Top Church Christian Fellowship**

Sermon

 *Ekklesia Series*

 *Where is God’s Faithful Church?*

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(Unless otherwise noted, NAS quoted)

Let us answer the question up-front as to where God’s legitimate Church is. It is where it has always been, indwelled in the hearts and minds of Believers. The Believers Church. Never forget that God came as Jesus to demonstrate that people can contain the Spirit of the eternal God. God chose to reside in a person’s heart. At the same time, if a person does not want God to reside in their heart, He will not force His way into their heart. God waits for an invitation. A great example of this is when Jesus witnesses to Nicodemus. Jesus leaves the choice to this teacher of Israel in John 3. Another example is when many who had been following Jesus refused to accept His teaching about drinking His blood and eating His flesh; they left. This is chronicled in John 6. They did not willingly surrender their hearts to the Lord. Jesus did not make them stay. They misunderstood the spiritual application of Jesus’ teaching, because they had only followed Jesus in their minds and not their hearts. The Believers Church of God are people who follow God with all their hearts, and they love their neighbor as God has empowered them.

We have covered a lot of history in this series about the history of the Church. We defined the reference to Church as being people that worship God. We saw in the Garden that Adam and Eve worshiped God. They received instruction from God; they talked with God. God spiritually walked alongside them. The Garden of Eden was a worshipful place. Adam and Eve communed with God. There wasn’t any sin activity. They paid homage to God by living the life He gave them until the time of the Fall. Thus, the Church, people in worship with God, starts with Adam and Eve.

We have referenced Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. God started the creation with His express intent to have a relationship with people. We see this in the Garden. Then He expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden due to their choosing to follow their own pride and not His grace provisions. However, God still pursues and seeks a relationship with people.

We can only speculate the distance in time from the creation to the life of Abram detailed in Genesis 12. All along the way, God presented the same covenant. I will be your God, and you will be my people. Walk in My ways, follow My commandments and you will live. Conversely, reject Me and follow your own way and you will die. So, we have seen this lived-out in human history since Genesis. We have seen personalities, civilizations, cultures and numerous attempts by Satan to derail God’s plan. All these have come and gone. However, with God’s Spirit united in His people, His redemptive plan moves forward. At times, there was just a remnant to carry God’s Light of Truth. Four thousand years since Abram, and we are here. The Light of God’s Truth shines in Believer’s hearts today.

With all that has gone before us in mind, we come to review a point in history that has been labeled the “Reformation.” The word “reform” is the base word.

The Reformation (more fully the Protestant Reformation, or the European Reformation) was a movement within Western Christianity in 16th-century Europe that posed a religious and political challenge to the Roman Catholic church – and papal authority in particular. Although the Reformation is usually considered to have started with the publication of the Ninety-five Theses by Martin Luther in 1517, there was no schism between the Catholics and the nascent Lutheran branch until the 1521 Edict of Worms. The edict condemned Luther and officially banned citizens of the Holy Roman Empire from defending or propagating his ideas.[2] The end of the Reformation era is disputed: it could be considered to end with the enactment of the confessions of faith which began the Age of Orthodoxy. Other suggested ending years relate to the Counter-Reformation, the Peace of Westphalia, or that it never ended since there are still Protestants today. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformation>

So, all of us not aligned with the state church, can historically be considered a “protestor” and participants in the movement to reform the state church, thus “reformers.” Or, we may reject this automatic assignment considering not to be labeled in anybody’s religious-political camp. We do not pursue man’s assignment or definition of religion.

There are other considerations. To reform something is typically considered an effort coming from within. We are not in the state church. We are not trying to reform from within the state church or from the outside.

I view the Believer’s life now, in our time, as not seeking to be involved with reform or protesting in the historical sense. These are Dark Age political and religious applications. Our call from God is to witness His Good News to all. We seek a personal relationship with people.

The institution of the state church and any offshoot thereof, is not the aim of our witness, people are. These institutions of man’s religion are more interested in pursuing their own desires. My view is that they are dangerously close to God turning them over to their own desires (Romans 1:18ff). This may have already happened. We may not have the state church in the form it was, but we have the same state church today. Obviously, this is the Roman Catholic Church. From the Dark Ages over time, the State of the Roman Bishop was reduced to 109 acres. Consider the assignment of the title “state” church. What accuracy does this title have in our time?

Officially today, the Roman Catholic Church is not a state-member of the United Nations. However, they were granted permanent observer state status of a non-member state on April 6, 1964. With this official recognition, they have the right to attend all sessions of the United Nations General Assembly, the United Nations Security Council, and the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This gives them the international right to observe their work. It is observed, because of the official status, the Roman Catholic Church has offices to the U.N. in New York and in Geneva. Thus, influences the U.N. decisions and recommendations.

So, the “state” status of the Dark Age state church has not changed at all. Their vote was removed but not their seat at the table.

Whatever decisions we make we impact the lives of our children. In all three Gospels, God warns us not to harm children. A person that brings harm to a child; it is better for a millstone to be placed around their neck and be thrown into the sea (Matthew 18:16, Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2). It is powerful when all three of the synoptic Gospels say the same thing. Gee, I wonder how many mistranslations of these passages exist? God, as Jesus, clearly states that we will know them by their fruit.

The passage in Romans 1 is a clear view to how God operates. People choose to rebel against God to the point that God stops talking to them. My view is that there are individuals in the state church today that God has turned over to their own desires. This state church in its current manifestations has continuing problems that have been reported repeatedly in the world wide media. It is preposterous that anyone would take their family or their children to them. Parents may not know for years what happened to their children, because the acts forced upon them twisted their minds into secrecy. Their whole leadership system is to blame for thousands of children being sexually abused. I have heard of these reports my whole life. From the Pope to the priest, their ranks are populated with perpetrators or those that covered-up these atrocities. God’s Word is not ambiguous in Romans. There is clarity here in these words.

 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,

 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

 24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

 25 For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

 26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,

 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

 28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,

 29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,

 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

 31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;

 32 and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. (Romans 1:22-32 NAU)

Here is an article in The Guardian online magazine by Joanna Moorhead. Tue 21 August 2018 05.56 EDT

How dare the pope ask ordinary Catholics to atone for child abuse?

It was the church hierarchy’s desperation to protect itself that led to these horrors. It must reform – not us

The Catholic church is in meltdown: the appalling story emerged last week of clerical abuse stretching back decades in Pennsylvania, where at least 1,000 children were the victims of 300 priests.

In the UK, a report on the behaviour of the monks at two leading Catholic schools was released recently. That report, from the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, details (and believe me, the details are horrendous) abuse over 40 years, affecting perhaps hundreds of children – the true extent of the crimes will probably never be known. As in Pennsylvania, the church authorities tried to cover it up: so in both places, these are double crimes committed by ordained men. First, they abused the most vulnerable young people in their care; and then other ordained men – usually more senior figures – allowed the abuse to continue by seeking to protect, not the children they were responsible for, but themselves and their precious reputations.

And now, after an embarrassing interlude, Pope Francis has spoken out. He has issued a letter – an “unprecedented letter”, we are told. He acknowledges the church’s crimes, he promises zero tolerance (about time) and then he invites “the entire holy faithful people of God to a penitential exercise of prayer and fasting, following the Lord’s command”.

Now, I like Pope Francis. He is charismatic and warm, and seems genuine in his care for the causes a Christian leader should care about. But here, pontiff, I see cardinal red. Because how dare you ask ordinary Catholics like me to atone for the sins of these heinous clerics? How dare you call on us to repent for their sins?

The truth about the Catholic church is that it is not fit for purpose, and it has not been fit for purpose for many years. There was a brief attempt, in the 1960s during the second Vatican council, at reevaluation – and then slam! The door was closed. It’s been run by a self-serving group of misogynistic men for far too long, and now we know they have a shocking number of paedophiles in their ranks. Radical new thinking is called for: those priests in Rome need to look up to the heavens and take in a very big swathe of blue sky.

The biggest horror about asking “the people of God” to repent is this: the church has failed, and failed, and failed again to ask “the people of God” to help it run the institution. It has been all too ready and willing to issue orders to the rest of us – and the miracle is that there are still some Catholic lay people who actually continue to keep some of those orders. Many priests by contrast, as we now know, not only flout the rules but flout them in the worst way possible, by ruining the lives of the most precious people in their midst.

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/21/pope-catholic-church-child-abuse-letter-atone

 Due to one atrocity after another, my view is that these religious structures of man, in America, will one day be empty like they are in Europe. They will die on the vine.

**We, Believers,** have a future the Lord has called us to live out. We have the calling from God to continue His plan of redemption one person at a time. My view is that we are still in an era of state church decline. From the last four hundred years, the historical designation, known as the Reformation, has been taking place. Remember, the Dark Ages lasted for about one thousand years. These eras in history are long. It may be decades before historians observe that we have moved from one era to another. Time will tell. One thing is for sure, God has time and patience.

So, what is our responsibility at this point in history? There were many groups that fractured from the state church. It is observed that groups following the teachings of Martin Luther, John Calvin and others formed their own religious cultures. All these men grew up in the state church. Once they read the Bible for themselves, (Thanks to Wycliff, Hus and Tyndale) they pursued a religious life apart from the state church. However, they did not totally break from all the teachings of the state church. They broke first and foremost from the authority of the state church. Once this was accomplished, they could teach freely from God’s Word (note that they had a copy). Modern minds need to understand what actually took place. Many of the areas in Germany became to be assigned as Roman Catholic or Lutheran. The same in France and other parts of Europe in regard to designating a geographic area to be assigned a particular religious zone. There was not a historical one day when the nations of Europe, claiming the same understanding, break from Rome. There was diversity just like we see in America. There was pressure for the induvial to participate in the religion of the region in which they lived. This carried over to America, the new world. Most colonial areas were also divided by church affiliation. It was not until the state of Pennsylvania was formed did religious freedom with which we are familiar exist.

History of Pennsylvania - King Charles II of England had a large loan with Penn's father, after whose death, King Charles settled by granting Penn a large area west and south of New Jersey on March 4, 1681. Penn called the area Sylvania (Latin for woods), which Charles changed to Pennsylvania in honor of the elder Penn. Perhaps the king was glad to have a place where religious and political outsiders (like the Quakers, or the Whigs, who wanted more influence for the people's representatives) could have their own place, far away from England.

The founding of Pennsylvania - In 1677, Penn's chance came, as a group of prominent Quakers, among them Penn, received the colonial province of West New Jersey (half of the current state of New Jersey). That same year, two hundred settlers from the towns of Chorleywood and Rickmansworth in Hertfordshire and other towns in nearby Buckinghamshire arrived, and founded the town of Burlington. Penn, who was involved in the project but himself remained in England, drafted a charter of liberties for the settlement. He guaranteed free and fair trial by jury, freedom of religion, freedom from unjust imprisonment and free elections.

Although Penn's authority over the colony was officially subject only to that of the king, through his Frame of Government he implemented a democratic system with full freedom of religion, fair trials, elected representatives of the people in power, and a separation of powers — again ideas that would later form the basis of the American constitution. The freedom of religion in Pennsylvania (complete freedom of religion for everybody who believed in God) brought not only English, Welsh, German and Dutch Quakers to the colony, but also Huguenots (French Protestants), Mennonites, Amish, and Lutherans from Catholic German states. http://www.ushistory.org/penn/bio.htm

 We see from reading about William Penn and Pennsylvania that the chance to come to the New World and worship God, as the individual person desired, was a new opportunity for Western man. The American religious experience of this era, in the late 1600’s, paved the way for the religious freedom state in the U.S. Constitution about one hundred years later. The idea that people could live in proximity to each other and have the freedom to approach God through an individual conscience is contagious.

We have this freedom environment today. No one dictated to our little church what we were going to believe, what we were going to write down in our constitution and by-laws.

However, looking back at the religious landscape of Europe coming from the Dark Age - what were the more pressing religious issues of the day? Starting with the examination of salvation, people were free to define God’s saving plan in their own words. There wasn’t any reliance upon officials from the state church dictating word-of-word what a person was to think, say and therefore, believe. The freedom for religious exploration for the individual became limitless.

The main issues people found the state church to be in error centered on:

1. Water-baptism required for salvation - not justified in Bible.
2. The Lord’s Supper is symbolic. Reject RCC claim to have authority to change the water and bread into blood and flesh of Jesus. Also rejected this teaching in its entirety.
3. Priesthood of the Believer, meaning that every person who believes in God has direct access to God. No more going through a priest.
4. Separation of state and church.
5. Rejection of Infant Baptism and the RCC authority to remove original sin.
6. Saved by Faith alone (“Sola Fide”)
7. Rejection of Roman Catholic authority. Luther called for the supreme authority of the Bible to be over the Church and Pope. (“Sola Scriptura”)

There was one parameter that the culture anticipated, and it almost went without saying: There is God and no other deity. The atheistic school of thought for Western man had not yet sprung. It was not until the age of science had entered into a maturing age with the Age of Reason, The Enlightenment (1700’s), did the idea grow and penetrate Western Leadership and trickle to the individual.

There can be reasonable observation that the Age of Reason is still with us today in that the atheistic culture grew from this time. We are at a place now that many in academia, government and the arts possess the worldview that truth can only come from what science tells us. God and His Bible do not represent verification of truth. In fact, the teaching from atheism today is hostile toward people who believe in God.

Focusing back on the opportunity for an individual to approach God on their own gives a person an environment to be self-expressive and the freedom to choose their associations. Thus, we are free to associate with any group or form our own.

From reading the Bible, we receive the idea that everyone is responsible for their own relationship with God. Jesus speaks to people in groups (Sermon on the Mount) and to individuals. We are given example after example of the individual call from God to make peace with Him. Jesus speaks to Nicodemus, the tax collector, the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery and many others calling them all to make a personal decision to surrender to Him. There is a consistency.

So, we, like those in Pennsylvania, have the same clean slate. The door is wide open. We have the freedom to individually believe and witness the Lord from our own conscience. Sounds great. But there is one problem. Most people in our time haven’t any idea what the Gospel Message is. If biblical-Christians talk about the Bible today, there is a gap between them and their audience. There are a few, but most adults who go to church are not prepared to witness the Gospel Message. Unfortunately, witnessing is viewed to be in the hands of full-time staff. Many Bible study books purchased in the bookstore or online are designed for a so-called Bible study teacher to facilitate the lesson, no real Bible knowledge required.

In America, we live in an age of ultimate freedoms and, at the same time, ultimate entertainment in a microwave society. Not enough time to slow down and absorb God’s Word. Only enough time to have a good feeling by listening to music and “religious in tone teachings” and sermons that bring comfort. The call for real change is seldom heard. The call for surrender and commitment has been laid by the wayside long ago. The “feel good” message combined with the lack of actually learning the Bible has intoxicated the Church to a point of not being able to hear. The church that called for a personal surrender to the conviction of God’s Holy Spirit has become the church of a conscience-free convenience.

However, the Lord always has His remnant.

**Romans 11:**1 I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.

 2 God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?

 3 "Lord, THEY HAVE KILLED YOUR PROPHETS, THEY HAVE TORN DOWN YOUR ALTARS, AND I ALONE AM LEFT, AND THEY ARE SEEKING MY LIFE."

 4 But what is the divine response to him? "I HAVE KEPT for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL."

 5 In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.