

Why I Am Re-Entering the Ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.

By Edwin H. Rian



On June 10, 1947, Rev. Edwin H. Rian, who had been deposed by the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (PCUSA) eleven years before and helped to found the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, delivered this statement to the Presbytery of Philadelphia of the PCUSA, asking to return to its ministry. The presbytery minutes read, "The Committee on Candidates and Credentials being convinced of the sincere repentance of Edwin H. Rian deposed from the ministry by the Presbytery of Philadelphia meeting in June 1936, recommends that Dr. Rian be restored...Dr. Edwin H. Rian read his statement and was then Ordained by the Moderator. A motion that Dr. Rian's name be enrolled in the membership of the Presbytery was adopted." Brief excerpts from this statement were previously published in Christian Century 64:26 (1947): 788-89.

Edwin H. Rian in 1950 (RG 414, Presbyterian Historical Society).

The decision to re-enter the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. after eleven years of separation has been the most difficult and heart-searching of my life. It has been made after months and months of deep thought, careful study of the scriptures, and agonizing of the soul. The process which led me to this judgment was a slow and painful experience filled with disappointments and disillusionments, but culminated by a clear conviction of the scriptural teaching on the visible Church of Jesus Christ. I am now firmly convinced that the formation of the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions and the separatist movement which it fostered was wrong, because it disrupted the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ. This profound belief, I hold, is in accord with the teaching of the Bible, which alone is the "Supreme Judge by whom all controversies of religion are to be determined," and also in accord with the best Reformed thought as expressed in Calvin's *Institutes*.

I do not propose to relate any personal experiences which caused me to make this decision nor to indulge in any form of name-calling. Many of my best friends are in those separatist movements, and all of them I regard as sincere Christian men. For this reason, I have purposely refrained from trying to persuade any of them to join my in my conclusions. Each man must be persuaded in his own mind. One always runs the risk of having his motives questioned as a result of such a major change of mind and heart. Nevertheless, my final

resolution is based upon the teaching of the Word of God. It is upon the high ground of principle that I prefer to have the issue discussed. What do the scriptures teach on the subject of the visible Church of Jesus Christ and our relation to that Church? That is the important and supreme question.

In the study of this subject I have found the most forceful, clear and full exposition of the Bible teaching to be that of John Calvin in the *Institutes*, Book IV chapter I and parts of chapter II. He argues his position so well and so in accord with the Bible that I can do no other than to reproduce his statement as my convictions on the true, visible Church of Jesus Christ. Other theologians and symbols of faith could be cited, but Calvin's arguments cover the subject sufficiently.

What is a true, visible Church of Jesus Christ?

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, together with 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.

And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered,

and public worship performed more or less purely in them. (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXV. Sections 2,4)

In this visible Church there are good and evil men, hypocrites as well as true believers. It is this Church which we are commanded to honor and in which we are to maintain communion.

What are the essential marks of a visible Church of Jesus Christ? What is the *sine qua non* of a congregation or a denomination, which must characterize a church if it is to be called a true, visible Church of Jesus Christ from which one should not separate? The two marks of a true, visible Church of Jesus Christ are the preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments according to the institution of Christ.

When we affirm the pure ministry of the word, and pure order in the celebration of the sacraments, to be a sufficient pledge and earnest, that we may safely embrace the society in which both these are found, as a true Church, we carry the observation to this point, that such a society should never be rejected as long as it continues in those things, although in other respects it may be chargeable with many faults. It is possible, moreover, that some fault may insinuate itself into the preaching of the doctrine, or the administration of the sacraments, which ought not to alienate us from its communion. (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936, Vol. II, IV.1.12)

Where are these marks of a true, visible Church to appear in the life of a particular church? How are they to be maintained? Must the practice of the church always be perfectly in accord with these essentials of religion? At this point, John Calvin is most emphatic and plain. These marks of a visible Church must appear in the articles of faith and in the profession of doctrine of the church, and even though the practice of that church is not always in accord with that doctrine, it is still a true Church.

It has further been shown, that the errors which are entitled to this forgiveness are those by which the grand doctrine of religion is not injured, which do not suppress the points in which all believers ought

to agree as articles of faith, and which, in regard to the sacraments, neither abolish nor subvert the legitimate institution of their Author. (Ibid, IX.ii,1)

We only contend for the true and legitimate constitution of the Church, which requires not only a communion in the sacraments, which are the signs of a Christian profession, but above all, an agreement in doctrine. (Ibid, IV.ii,12)

Now, this communion is preserved by two bonds—agreement in sound doctrine, and brotherly love. (Ibid, IV.ii,5)

Calvin left the Roman Catholic Church not only because it was corrupt in practice, but above all, because it had subverted the marks of a true Church: the Word of God and the sacraments in its articles of faith. Most of the first chapter of Book IV of the *Institutes* is devoted to the defense of the thesis that a congregation or denomination may not practice this creedal profession as it should, and yet remain a true Church from which a Christian should not separate. He uses three main arguments from the Bible which, in my judgment, are unanswerable. These statements or arguments he employs especially to combat the Anabaptist heresy that only a pure church is a true Church.

The first scriptural example is taken from the parables of our Lord.

But that they may also understand, that it is composed of good and bad men mingled together, let them hear that parable from the lips of Christ, where it is compared to a net, in which fishes of all kinds are collected, and no separation is made till they are exposed on the shore. (Mat. XII.47) Let them hear another parable comparing the Church to a field, which, after having been sown with good seed, is, by the craft of an enemy, corrupted with tares, from which it is never cleared till the harvest is brought into the barn. (Mat. XIII.24) Lastly, let them hear another comparison of the Church to a threshing-floor, in which the wheat is collected in such manner, that it lies concealed under the chaff, till, after being carefully purged, by winnowing and sifting, it is at length laid up in the garner. (Mat. III.12) But if our Lord declares, that the Church is to labour under this evil, and to be encumbered with a mix-

ture of wicked men, even till the day of a judgment, it is vain to seek for a church free from every spot. (Ibid, IV.i,13)

Calvin's second argument is from the Apostle Paul. The churches at Corinth and Galatia were very wicked, not only in life but in doctrine as well. And yet Paul called them churches of Jesus Christ. (I Cor. 1.2, Gal.1.2)

Among the Corinthians, more than a few had gone astray, and the infection had seized almost the whole society; there was not only one species of sin, but many; and they were not trivial faults, but dreadful crimes; and there was not only a corruption of morals, but also of doctrine. In this case, what is the conduct of the holy apostle, the organ of the heavenly Spirit, by whose testimony the Church stands or falls? Does he seek to separate from them? Does he reject them from the kingdom of Christ? Does he strike them with the thunderbolt of the severest anathema? He not only does none of these things, but, on the contrary, acknowledges and speaks of them as a Church of Christ and a society of saints. If there remained a church among the Corinthians, where contentions, factions, and emulations were raging; where cupidity, disputes, and litigations were prevailing; where a crime held in execration even among the Gentiles, was publicly sanctioned; where the name of Paul, whom they ought to have revered as their father, was insolently defamed; where some ridiculed the doctrine of the resurrection, with the subversion of which the whole gospel would be annihilated; where the graces of God were made subservient to ambition, instead of charity; where many things were conducted without decency and in order; and if there still remained a Church, because the ministry of the word and sacraments was not rejected—who can refuse the name of a Church to those who cannot be charged with a tenth part of those crimes? And those who display such violence and severity against the churches of the present age, I ask, how would they have conducted themselves toward the Galatians, who almost entirely deserted the gospel, but among whom, nevertheless, the same apostle found churches? (Ibid, IV.i,14)

Calvin further buttresses this contention by stating that even when the discipline of the church is not as strict as it ought to be and allows wicked men to remain, still one should not separate himself from that communion if it bears the marks of the true church.

But it is one thing to avoid familiar intercourse with the wicked; and another thing, from hatred of them, to renounce the communion of the Church. (Ibid, IV.i,15)

In other words, Calvin is exposing the fallacy of the interpretation of the passage in II Corinthians 6:11-18 to the effect that believers should not stay in a church with unbelievers. If "come ye out from among them" and "be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" means that all believers should leave a church that does not practice its true profession of faith as it should, why did Paul call Corinth a "church of God," and why didn't he urge them to leave the Corinthian Church, which was filled with unbelief? This passage clearly refers to separation from personal intercourse with unbelievers, and not to separation from a church which bears the marks of a true visible Church but which may not live up to that profession.

The third main argument which Calvin employs is the testimony of the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Habakkuk and others deplored the corruption of doctrine and life in the Church at Jerusalem. There was such degeneration that the prophets compared Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Nevertheless, the prophets on this account neither raised themselves new churches, nor built new alters for the oblation of separate sacrifices; but whatever were the characters of the people, yet because they considered that God had deposited his word among that nation, and instituted the ceremonies in which he was there worshipped, they lifted up pure hands to him even in the congregation of the impious. But if the holy prophets were restrained by a sense of duty from forsaking the Church on account of the numerous and enormous crimes which were practiced, not by a few individuals but almost by the whole nation—it is extreme arrogance in us, if we presume immediately to withdraw from the communion of

a church where the conduct of all members is not compatible either with our judgment, or even with the Christian profession. (Ibid, IV.i,13)

As a matter of fact, Calvin reminds us that even Christ and the apostles used the same sacrifices and assembled in the same synagogue with the Pharisees. Calvin further enforces his argument by quoting from Cyprian.

Although tares, or impure vessels, are found in the Church, yet this is not a reason why we should withdraw from it. It only behooves us to labour that we may be the wheat, and to use our utmost endeavors and exertions, that we may be vessels of gold or of silver. But to break in pieces the vessels of earth belongs to the Lord alone, to whom a rod of iron is also given. Nor let anyone arrogate to himself what is exclusively the province of the Son of God, by pretending to fan the floor, clear away the chaff, and separate all the tares by the judgment of man. This is proud obstinacy and sacrilegious presumption, originating in a corrupt frenzy. (Ibid, IV.i,19)

Calvin concludes his contention with this assertion:

What are we to say of cases in which the most enormous sins have sometimes seized whole churches? From this situation Paul rather mercifully reclaimed them than abandoned them to the curse. The defection of the Galatians was no trivial offence. The Corinthians were still less excusable, their crimes being more numerous and equally enormous. Yet neither are excluded from the mercy of the Lord: on the contrary, the very persons who had gone beyond all others in impurity, unchastity, and fornication, are expressly invited to repentance. (Ibid, IV.i,27)

The application of these Biblical principles is plain. Whenever a Church in its profession of doctrine adheres to the Bible as the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments according to the institution of Christ, even though the practice of the church may not be up to its profession and even though there may be hypocrites and unbelievers in the society, that church is a true, visible Church of Jesus Christ. Anyone separating from such a communion is disrupting the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. is, accordingly, a true Church of Jesus Christ. The supreme standard of that Church is the Bible as the Word of God, and the subordinate standards are the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms. When a man presents himself for ordination to the holy ministry, he must answer affirmatively these two questions: "Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?" and "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and this Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?" In my judgment, the Westminster Confession of Faith is the most consistent, logical and full expression of the system of doctrine taught in the Bible that can be found in human writings. If ever a church exemplified a profession of a true doctrine, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. does. It does not claim to be a pure Church in its practices, nor in the practices of its members. What church can make such a claim? However, it is my firm conviction that the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. bears the marks of a true, visible Church of Jesus Christ.

In the light of these convictions, I am now certain that it was wrong to form the separatist movement in 1938 and to proclaim the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. as apostate. My eleven years of association with that separatist movement have only confirmed the teaching of the scriptures on the visible Church and the mistake of withdrawing from one of its true, visible branches. My great regret is that I did not see this clearly eleven years ago. P