

## A Brief Testimony Against The Practice Of Occasional Hearing

The following question and remark are representative of most professing Christians today, “What could possibly be wrong with visiting a church or hearing a minister whose professed doctrine, worship, or form of church government is contrary to that of Scripture and to that of my own church? As long as the church I visit affirms the fundamentals of the Christian faith, it can certainly be no sin to demonstrate my Christian unity and communion with brethren in such churches by worshiping together.”

To maintain that there is a serious problem in occasionally worshiping with Christians in a church which differs from one’s own church in stated doctrines, views of worship, or form of church government is to incur (most likely) the unbelieving gaze or even the verbal attack of family, friends, and even strangers. One may be certain, however, that it is not because a Christian enjoys hearing epithets like “narrow-minded extremists,” “perfectionists,” or “separatists.” Nor is it because he wants to appear more righteous than other Christians. Nor is it because he despises his own family or the Lord’s people in other churches that he steadfastly embraces a position that sharply cuts against the pluralistic grain of contemporary Christianity. To the contrary, it is the testimony of this church (and that of faithful Reformed Churches of the past) that a Christian should decline attending the public administrations of a minister of an unfaithful church for no other reason than that the Lord Jesus Christ commands it in His infallible Word. Thus, it is not a simple question of expediency (“Would it not be better to attend the service in order to avoid divisions within our family?”), but rather it is a question of conscience (“What must I do in order to be obedient to Christ?”). If one professes to be a Christian, he must desire (above all else) to hear and obey the Word of the Lord, even more than he desires to please any family member, friend, or leader. While the Fifth Commandment (“Honor thy father and thy mother”) is always to be obeyed, it must never be construed that such honor requires us to please father or mother, husband or wife, son or daughter, friend or stranger at the expense of our obedience to God and His holy Word. The Lord could not have been more clear than when He proclaimed:

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me (Mt. 10:37).

No matter how difficult the decision, the supreme consideration for the Christian must always be,

What saith the scripture (Rom. 4:3)?

Thus, we ask the reader to suspend his judgment concerning Occasional Hearing until he has heard the biblical case against attending the public administrations of a minister of an unfaithful church. Furthermore, we ask each reader to suspend all subjective and pragmatic questions concerning family and friends until he has carefully considered the objective testimony of God speaking in His holy Word.

## 1. What is Occasional Hearing?

Briefly stated, Occasional Hearing refers to the occasional practice of either attending the public acts of worship or of receiving the official administrations of a minister who is a member of an unfaithful church (i.e. a church that has backslidden from the testimony of Scripture and from the biblical testimony found in faithful creeds, catechisms, covenants, and decisions of churches).

Let us consider a couple examples of Occasional Hearing that will help to illustrate the biblical principles that apply in such cases. First, let's say that church A does not publicly confess an orthodox view of the trinity in its statement of faith. Should members of church B who do profess an orthodox view of the trinity occasionally frequent services or events where the minister of church A is leading acts of worship? We respond that such Occasional Hearing would be an express violation of God's Word. The apostle John writes by inspiration of the Holy Spirit,

If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine [i.e. the doctrine of Christ], receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds (2

Jn. 10,11).

Carefully note what the Lord declares herein concerning the issue of fellowship with ministers who depart from the established doctrine of Christ: receive them not into your home, nor bid them God's success. If it is even forbidden to invite such teachers of error (in their official capacities) into the privacy of our home (so as to instruct us or to fellowship with us), how much more do we aggravate our sin when we attend services and ceremonies where such teachers of error are performing public acts of worship (in their official capacities). In other words, if it is a sin to countenance the private administrations of a teacher of error (in his official capacity), how much more it is a sin to countenance the public administrations of the same teacher (in his official capacity). Now why is it a sin to receive such a teacher (in his official capacity) even into the privacy of our home? Because the apostle John states (above in 2 Jn. 11) that even a private reception of such a teacher (in his official capacity) into our home is at least an implied approval of the error publicly professed by that teacher, and in so doing we become partakers in the false views of that teacher (i.e. our silent approval signifies our fellowship in the errors of that teacher). Thus, if we are partakers of their false teachings when they visit us in the privacy of our homes, how much more we are partakers of their false teachings when we visit them in their public administrations of worship within their churches. In fact, this same principle of corporate fellowship in the false worship of others is illustrated by the apostle Paul as well:

But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils (1 Cor. 10:20).

In what ways might Corinthian believers have fellowship with devils? One way would be by actually worshiping the idols of the Gentiles. However, this was not the danger that concerned the apostle Paul. Another way of having fellowship with devils would be simply by attending the pagan services of the Gentiles and receiving the meat and drink that had been offered to idols. The Corinthian Christians certainly did not approve of the false worship of the Gentiles, but rather were tempted simply to eat at the pagan temples in order to enjoy the delicious food (that happened to have been offered to idols). Now this was the dangerous fellowship with devils which Paul would have the Corinthians to avoid at all costs. Paul, clearly states that to attend the pagan temple and to eat of the meat that had been offered to idols was to partake by way of corporate association with the errors of the pagan temples.

Perhaps it is too obvious that we should shun the official administrations of teachers who do not hold the fundamentals of Christianity. But what about those ministers who faithfully adhere to the fundamentals, but yet have fallen from certain truths commanded by Christ in His Word and professed in faithful confessions and catechisms? Must these ministers also be avoided in their official capacities?

For example, church C states in its public creed that the infant children of believers should NOT be baptized in water; while church D in its confession of faith steadfastly affirms that the infant children of believers should be baptized with water. Now both of these churches cannot be right in the contrary doctrines professed. The one church is believed to be in error by the other church. Although it is admitted that the baptism of infants (or the omission thereof) is not a doctrine that effects the essential being of a church of Christ (i.e. makes a church to be no church at all), nevertheless, it is confessed by both churches that Christ has either commanded that infants be baptized or He has commanded that infants NOT be baptized. Both churches appeal to the Word of God for their professed statement of faith concerning the baptism (or omission of the baptism) of infants (we in the Puritan Reformed Church affirm that both Scripture and faithful creeds such as The Westminster Confession of Faith teach that it is the duty of Christian parents to bring their infant children to lawful ministers in order to be baptized). The question this brief paper seeks to answer is this: Can members from church D lawfully attend (even occasionally) the worship services or other ceremonies performed by the minister of church C (in his official capacity) without becoming a partaker of his error? Does the biblical principle of corporate fellowship in the errors of others (established above) only apply to certain gross errors or does it apply to all professed errors contained in a church's official statement of faith and in the church's official decisions? It is not the degree of professed and obstinate error that is in question, but rather the presence of professed and obstinate error that is in question. Granted, the degree of professed and obstinate error in a church does aggravate the sin of Occasional Hearing, but it is the presence of professed and obstinate error (contrary to the Scripture and biblical confessions, catechisms, and covenants) in a church that biblically warrants Christians to avoid the official acts of that church's ministers until such a time as there is a disavowal of error and the public embracing of truth. If the differences in doctrine, worship, or church government are serious enough so as to divide one church from another (so that they cannot be one church embracing the same doctrine, worship, and church government), then the differences are also serious enough to prevent the occasional attendance at such a church.

Let us consider that our expressed and stated duty is to avoid even those ministers (in their official capacity) we consider to be brethren in the Lord should they publicly and obstinately profess a doctrine contrary to the truth revealed in Scripture and contrary to the truth expressed in a biblical creed, catechism, or covenant.

Cease, my son, to hear the instruction that causeth to err from the words of knowledge (Prov. 19:27).

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them (Rom. 16:17).

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the the tradition which he received of us (2 Thess. 3:6).

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness . . . from such withdraw thyself (1 Tim. 6:3,5).

Certainly, if we are to avoid or to withdraw from brethren (in general) who walk disorderly contrary to the doctrine of the apostles, how much more are we commanded (this is not optional according to 2 Thess. 3:6) to do so with brethren specifically who profess to be ministers of Jesus Christ, and yet who publicly and obstinately walk contrary to the doctrine of the apostles (which is professed in biblical confessions of faith, catechisms, and solemn covenants). Ministers should not be under a more lenient standard, but rather under a more strict standard according to the Word of God.

My brethren, be not many masters [literally, teachers—PRCE], knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation (Jms. 3:1).

Occasional Hearing may occur on the Lord's Day, or on any other day of the week. It may occur in a designated worship service, or in other services or ceremonies where public acts of worship are performed (e.g. stated prayer meetings, Bible studies, weddings, or funerals). The critical principle to grasp is that a minister of an unfaithful church is not to

be publicly countenanced in acts of worship or any administration in his official capacity. For a minister must not be viewed as an entity completely separate from the church of which he is an official representative. To the contrary, there is a necessary link between a church and its ministers who are publicly called and sent by that church to declare the stated doctrine, worship, and government as found in its public confession and official acts. Thus, the sin committed by the practice of Occasional Hearing is partaking in the guilt of churches and of ministers who maintain and propagate errors (in doctrine, worship, and government) contrary to the supreme standard of God's Word and to the subordinate standard of a faithful, biblical creed (such as the Westminster Confession of Faith).

Before we consider why this practice is contrary to the biblical duty of every Christian, let us not only be clear as to what Occasional Hearing is, but also as to what Occasional Hearing is not. Occasional Hearing is not practiced when one informally meets with Christian friends or family members from churches other than his own. Nor is Occasional Hearing practiced when a friend or family member (who also happens to be a minister of an unfaithful church) drops by to visit as long as he does so in his unofficial capacity as a friend or family member and not in his official capacity as a minister of an unfaithful church. Finally, we do not maintain that members and ministers of unfaithful churches are nonchristians by virtue of their mere membership in an unfaithful church. There may, indeed, be Christians in unfaithful churches and nonchristians in faithful churches. Nor do we deny that unfaithful churches are yet visible churches of Christ as to their essential being (if they hold the foundation of Christ, e.g. the trinity, the deity of Christ, the substitutionary death of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the sinfulness of man). Unfaithful churches are those churches that have backslidden (from the Word of God and from biblical creeds, catechisms, and covenants) in their public profession of the truth.

## 2. What is the problem with Occasional Hearing?

a. Occasional Hearing subverts biblical truth.

This is most evident from the following inference: When I occasionally attend a church that publicly and obstinately promotes error contrary to the supreme standard of God's Word and contrary to a biblical subordinate standard (such as the Westminster Confession

of Faith), I necessarily encourage the promotion of that particular error by my attendance, and I necessarily undermine the corresponding truth by my willing attendance. For if all Christians rightly performed their duty and avoided all ministers (in their official capacities) within unfaithful churches, error would certainly decrease among Christians while truth would abundantly increase. Moreover, if we sanction the propagation of error by attending the services and ceremonies of churches and their ministers who are publicly and obstinately committed to maintain such error, we work against the truth by building up the very error we have sought to destroy. Thus, if we confess with the Scripture and a biblical creed that salvation is by faith alone in the merit of the Lord Jesus Christ, but occasionally attend a church that publicly and obstinately professes that we can be saved by our own merit, we have destroyed (by our actions) the truth we sought to establish. The apostle Paul calls one who aids and abets error in this way a transgressor.

For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor (Gal. 2:18).

b. Occasional Hearing destroys biblical unity.

Biblical unity is not a matter of dispensing with truth so that Christians can get together at the lowest common denominator. To the contrary, biblical unity is founded in a like-mindedness in the truth, and in an uniformity of doctrine, worship, and government. Doctrinal pluralism and toleration of error within the church does not actually promote biblical unity in the truth, but rather a confederacy in error. The goal of biblical unity is not a mere confederation, although believing and practicing many things contrary to one another, but rather a communion in believing and practicing as many things in common to one another as possible (as exemplified in faithful confessions, catechisms, and covenants). Thus, the more we begin to confess the same truths in all humility and love, the more we begin to enjoy biblical unity. How does unity manifest itself within the Godhead? By doctrinal pluralism, or toleration of error, or finding the lowest common denominator of truth? God forbid! The revealed will of God concerning unity is articulated by the Lord Jesus Christ in His prayer for His people before His death:

And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me (Jn.17:22,23).

Unity among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is manifested by a oneness in the knowledge of the truth. The unity of which Christ herein speaks is not simply a spiritual unity, but also a visible unity among professing Christians. For how will the world know that the Father has sent the Son, unless there is a visible manifestation of unity among Christ's followers? Although Christians cannot achieve the same perfect agreement in the truth as is realized in the Godhead, nevertheless, it must be our stated goal to endeavor a likeness to that of the Trinity in matters concerning the truth. The unity of Christians is to reflect the unity manifested in the Godhead: a unity in truth, rather than a toleration of professed error.

Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:5,6).

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment (1 Cor. 1:10).

Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing (Phil. 3:16).

Thus, contrary to the opinion of many, we actually do not promote biblical unity at all when we occasionally attend the worship services and ceremonies conducted by ministers who publicly and obstinately profess error contrary to the mind of God revealed in Scripture and contrary to the truth of Christ expressed in a biblical creed. Rather than promoting unity in the truth by our occasional attendance at such services, we promote division in the truth by joining in public worship with those whom we profess to be in error. Furthermore, if we believe we can worship with such churches occasionally without sin, then we sin against our own understanding of unity by not worshiping with those churches continuously. The inherent inconsistency among those who practice occasional hearing and yet remain separate from such churches is accurately summarized by a committee meeting at the Westminster Assembly:

If they [i.e. the Independents—PRCE] may occasionally exercise these acts of communion [i.e.

occasional acts of worship—PRCE] with us [the Presbyterians—PRCE] once, or a second, or a third time, without sin, we know no reason why it may not be ordinary [i.e. regular attendance—PRCE], without sin too, and then separation [from us—PRCE] ... would have been needless. To separate from those Churches ordinarily and visibly, with whom occasionally you may join without sin, seemeth to be a most unjust separation (\_The Grand Debate\_, [Still Waters Revival Books], pp.55,56).

In fact, it must be a scandalous sin to remain divided from any church in which it is not sinful to worship occasionally. In other words, if I can worship occasionally with Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, or Pentecostals and receive the official acts of their ministers, I should not be in a separate church from them at all (rather I should be permanently united with them). The kind of religious toleration practiced by churches and ministers today (in doctrine, worship, and church government) is indeed despised by the Lord Jesus.

So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate (Rev. 2:15).

Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest [i.e. tolerates] that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols (Rev. 2:20).

c. Occasional Hearing violates biblical covenants.

We in the Puritan Reformed Church publicly profess that the biblical covenants of our faithful forefathers (e.g. the National Covenant of Scotland, and the Solemn League and Covenant of the three kingdoms of England, Ireland, and Scotland) bind us to walk in obedience to these covenants because (1) they are agreeable to the Word of God; and because (2) they were sworn on our behalf as their posterity. By our solemn covenant engagements (as stated in the Solemn League and Covenant), we are bound before the living God to perform the following lawful duties:

That we shall, in like manner, without respect of persons, endeavour the extirpation [i.e. uprooting—PRCE] of Popery, Prelacy (that is, Church government by archbishops, bishops, their chancellors and commissioners, deans, deans and chapters, archdeacons, and all other ecclesiastical officers depending on that hierarchy), superstition, heresy, schism, profaneness, and whatsoever shall be

found contrary to sound doctrine and the power of Godliness; lest we partake in other men's sins, and thereby be in danger to receive of their plagues; and that the Lord may be one, and his name one, in the three kingdoms.

We shall also, according to our places and callings, in this common cause of religion, liberty, and peace of the kingdoms, assist and defend all those that enter into this League and Covenant, in the maintaining and pursuing thereof; and shall not suffer ourselves, directly or indirectly, by whatsoever combination, persuasion, or terror, to be divided or withdrawn from this blessed union and conjunction, whether to make defection to the contrary part, or to give ourselves to a detestable indifferency or neutrality in this cause, which so much concerneth the glory of God, the good of the kingdom, and honour of the king; but shall, all the days of our lives, zealously and constantly continue therein against all opposition, and promote the same, according to our power, against all lets [i.e. hindrances—PRCE] and impediments whatsoever; and what we are not able ourselves to suppress or overcome, we shall reveal and make known, that it may be timely prevented or removed: All which we shall do as in the sight of God.

These covenants bind us to oppose and uproot all error, heresy, and schism according to our own stations and callings. It is impossible to oppose and uproot that which we sanction by our willing attendance and voluntary participation. For example, since the Romish mass is a heresy that I am bound to oppose and uproot by the biblical covenants of my forefathers, I am thereby obligated not to sanction the Romish mass by ever attending it, or for that matter any other service or ceremony performed by a Romish priest. To sanction by my attendance that which I am bound by covenant to oppose, is to sin against that sacred covenant made with God (and in like manner, I cannot lawfully sanction by my attendance any other professed, public error of a church that falls away from God's Word and the faithful creed of the church of which I am a member). It is to break the Third Commandment:

Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain (Ex. 20:7).

d. Occasional Hearing sets a stumbling block before others.

The Word of God gives us serious warnings against the sin of placing unnecessary stumbling blocks before the faith of others. We are never to lead others to sin by our example in word or in deed (which is all that is meant by a stumbling block or an offense).

Listen to the sobering words of our Lord in this regard:

Then said he unto the disciples, It is impossible but that offenses [i.e. stumbling blocks] will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves (Lk. 17:1-3).

But someone may ask, “How can I lead others to sin by my occasional practice of attending services or ceremonies performed by ministers from unfaithful churches?” Simply by my example of attending the services and ceremonies of ministers that publicly and obstinately walk contrary to the doctrine of the apostles, I will encourage others to attend these same services and ceremonies and to give their approval to these ministers. In so doing, I have not only shown myself guilty of partaking in the corporate error of these ministers, but I have further aggravated my sin significantly by leading others into the same sin. I have become an accessory and accomplice to the sin of others.

### 3. What would we have family and friends to realize?

To those of you who have been given this paper to read in order to understand why a father or a mother, a son or a daughter, a family member or a friend may believe he/she cannot attend the service or ceremony to which he/she has been invited, we would like you to know that the nonattendance of a loved one or friend is not personally directed toward you in the least. The issue before us is not necessarily the service or ceremony, but rather the issue at hand is the minister who leads the ceremony (in his official capacity). As a minister of a church that publicly and obstinately walks contrary to the testimony of God’s Word and to the testimony of biblical protestant creeds (such as the Westminster Confession of Faith), we cannot give him our endorsement.

It is not our desire to divide the family, nor is it our intention to minimize the love which family members should rightly have for one another. Please understand that your loved one would not be taking this extremely difficult step if he/she were not convinced that obedience to Jesus Christ requires it. That being the case, surely you could not want

him/her to sin against the Lord God. However, if you are convinced that the position represented in this brief paper is unbiblical, we would welcome a biblical response. We pray that the decision of your loved one not to attend this event will not be interpreted as a lack of love or respect. For biblical love is defined as keeping God's commandments (1 Jn. 5:3) which is all that we are seeking to do. And biblical respect is always submission "in the Lord" (Eph. 6:1), i.e. submission in all that is agreeable to the Word of the Lord. We encourage all who read this brief testimony against Occasional Hearing to consider carefully the biblical principles stated herein, and should further questions arise, we, the elders of Puritan Reformed Church, would be very willing to seek to answer those questions or be of help in any way that we can.

The Session of the Puritan Reformed Church of Edmonton

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