

IS THE CHURCH ESSENTIAL?

The question of the title is adequately answered in the definition we have established for the church. It is simply, but vitally, "...a covenant relationship, a commitment, between God who forgives and one who is forgiven in his/her obedience to its gospel (Mark 16:15-16; Romans 6:3-4)." Therefore, if being forgiven by God and committed to his service is essential, so is the church.

Let's take the matter further. Paul's letter to the Ephesians has been called "An Apostolic Syllabus on the New Testament Church." So it is and leaves no doubt about the essentiality of the church.

The church, as Paul described it to the Ephesian Christians is, "...His (Christ's) body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). Since the church is the fullness of Christ, and since every spiritual blessing is in him (1:3), having this "in Christ" relationship is therefore essential to our enjoyment of every spiritual blessing.

Notice that Paul referred to the church as the body of Christ (1:23) and that it is in this body God has established peace between Jew and Gentile and reconciled both to himself (2:14-16). This, obviously, is spiritual peace without which mankind remain at enmity with one another and alienated from God. Is this peace essential to mankind's well-being? Certainly!

Further, the church is what God planned through the ages for the relationship the redeemed would bear to him. Redemption has always required man's faith (Hebrews 11:6) though what God has required as a demonstration of it varied in Old Testament times prior to the revelation of the gospel of Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2ff). However, the coming of Christ manifested God's wisdom—the sacrificial price to be paid and his choice of the relationship it would purchase, one body, the church comprised of individuals redeemed in Christ (3:1-6, 10-11).

Further yet, Christ has but one body (3:6; 4:4). Understanding this does not require logical genius. Since there is but one Christ, and since he is the one head in God's plan, it follows that he has but one body—the church (1:22-23). But accepting this fact does require putting away a lot of mushy denominational thinking about what the church actually is, and what God requires of us to become members of it and serve him faithfully in it.

Finally, the church is the spiritual bride of Christ consisting of the ones he provides for spiritually and saves eternally (5:22-33). Please notice that this does not describe the church as a hierarchical institution with the authority to dictate who will be saved. To the contrary, Christ alone is the Savior and the church, his bride, his body, is what he saves. Essential? Yes!

—Jerry F. Bassett