

IS THE CHURCH ESSENTIAL TO SALVATION?

If by the term “church” is meant a humanly originated sect, the answer is “no.” None of the things men have originated and tagged with the term “church” have any place in God’s plan. No ecclesiasticism, no religious institution, nor any denominational sect of man’s devising has anything to do with God’s provision for the saving of man from sin and providing for him the gift of eternal life.

But, if by the term “church,” one has in mind the spiritual relationship of salvation described in the Bible, that is a different matter. The church in this context is precisely what God sent Jesus to provide, and is specifically what Jesus promised to do at the cost of his own sacrificial blood (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 5:25). Viewed from this perspective, one can no more be saved without the church than he could be saved without the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Thus, we are not talking about an organization of any sort. Rather, we speak of the spiritual relationship planned by God for mankind’s reconciliation to God that was made possible by the sacrificial death of Christ in man’s behalf. This reconciliation of sinful mankind to God from a state of alienation is what salvation is. This is what Jesus was talking about and promising when he said, “...I will build My church, and the gates of Hades (death) shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

This conclusion is clear and irresistible by observation of the various figures found in the Bible that describe the church. Notice...

1. The church is described as being the body of Christ of which he is the head (Ephesians 1:22, 23). Thus, to be related to Christ as being one’s spiritual head, one must be a member of Christ’s church “which,” Paul wrote, “is his body.”

2. The church is described as the kingdom of Christ as one observes the context of Colossians 1:13, 14, 18). Thus, to be saved in submission to the saving reign of Christ, one must be a citizen in his kingdom which is—the church.

3. The church is said to be the household of God (I Timothy 3:14, 15). Childhood to one’s father implies membership in his household. Being a child of God necessarily implies one is in God’s household which is—the church.

Essential? Yes!

—Jerry F. Bassett