



continuous conversion



OPEN OR CLOSED?

BY SARA TUSEK

A question that has never been conclusively answered in the Christian church is this: should the Church be open or closed? That is, should only Christians be allowed to attend church? Should church activities be closed to non-Christians? What appears to be a simple, basic question has proven, over two millennia, far more controversial than one might think.



Prague, Czech Republic

need to create a defined church structure, theology or creed.

There was being a Christian, or not; since there was little to be gained by pretending to be a Christian, except possible persecution or political disfavor, the church was most likely both closed in that only sincere believers were part of it and open in the sense of accepting converts who could effectively plead their case.

The Early Church

In the earliest days of the Christian church, this question had slightly different overtones than today. The first Christians were Jewish and met in the synagogue; most likely they didn't think of themselves as a separate church in any sense, but as a sect of Jewish religious expression. Probably their gatherings were open to any interested Jews, but certainly not to non-Jews.

Within the first 100 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the ethnic background of the Christian church shifted from Jewish to Gentile. These non-Jewish Christians met in secret, in underground catacombs or other hidden places. In this era of the Church, membership was closed out of fear of persecution by government officials in the Roman empire.

The early Church was not a place that attracted casual attendees. There was no church shopping. People interested in becoming Christians were not led to church by a billboard or a TV ad; they were invited by friends into a close-knit community that knew its own. Newcomers were not strangers, but were brought by trusted members.

In those days the idea of open or closed might refer to allowing people with questionable motives or a political agenda into services, but probably did not consider whether or not people's beliefs were orthodox, as there was no readily-available guide to orthodoxy. In such a secretive atmosphere there was neither time nor perceived

After Constantine

Once Christianity received the official blessing of Constantine in the 4th century, its circumstances changed dramatically.

From being one of many small religious sects, it gained power and strength from its unique affiliation with the Roman government. Christianity was established as the religion that reflected the worldview of the state; the sacred and secular were combined, as has been the case in many nations, especially in Europe.

By accepting (and thus endorsing) the authority of the Christian church, the Roman government received a powerful boost to its claim to legitimacy. The power of the state did not flow from mere human efforts, but was approved by God Himself. Spiritual and legal authority combined to uphold the power of Roman rule.

This close partnership of church and state led to a completely open church, in the sense that all citizens belonged to the Christian Church, regardless of their own personal belief system.

It also eventually led to the corruption and folly of the medieval Christian church, which, unable to consistently sort out its sacred and secular roles, was often waylaid in the service of earthly politics. It's hard to stay "spotless and without blemish," as the Church (the Bride of Christ) is ordered by God to strive to be, when, for example, the temporal powers of King and Bishop are in conflict. *To p. 2*



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It's next to impossible for the Church to remain authentic in its Christianity when it is compelled by the secular powers to remain open to those who might or might not have had a true conversion experience. The wide-open Church became full of discord as it tried to be holy while simultaneously receiving all citizens of the various nations in which it was established (including Armenia, Georgia, Syria and Persia, as well as many European kingdoms), regardless of those people's state of grace.

The Church: East vs. West

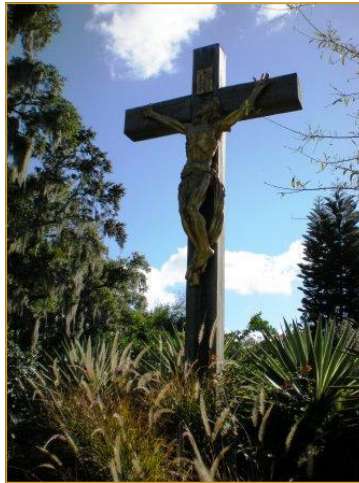
The Christian Church was split into two by the Roman/Orthodox division. The Roman Empire became so large in the fifth century that it was divided into two administrative regions. In Western Europe, the Emperor followed Roman tradition; in the East, the Byzantine Empire developed its own way of understanding Christian faith. In 1054, the differences became such an obstacle that the two contending Christian leaders excommunicated each other, each claiming to represent the True Church. Romans excluded Orthodox, who excluded Romans. Both churches closed toward each other decisively.

The European Protestant Reformation

Periodically, those within the Roman Church attempted to reform it, to make it more closely resemble the image of Christ. These attempts were sometimes successful on a small scale, but after 1400 years of piecemeal reform a number of concerned Western European Christians decided in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries that stronger measures were needed.

These leaders and their followers, who did not "speak with one voice" on the specifics of the nature of change needed, have been lumped together by historians as the Protestant Reformation. It's unfortunate that, having been seen as similar in one regard (protesting the alleged sinful behavior of the established Roman Church) they were seen as similar in all important regards. They were not.

A close examination of the beliefs of John Knox, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Martin Luther, John Calvin and other greats of the Western European Reformation reveals differences between their theologies as significant as those between their theologies and that of the Roman



Polasek Gardens, Winter Park, FL

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Church. Radically differing views in regard to salvation, sanctification, spiritual authority and the duties of believers marked the Protestant reformers, and eventually led to hundreds of denominations of the Church, some of which are open, and some closed.

Open, Closed—or Halfway?

In America's colonies of the 1600's, the splitting of Protestants into contending denominations, and the tension between Protestants and Roman Catholics

produced a Church with little unity. "Open or closed" became an issue with great polarizing consequences. For example, those deemed to be saved by God (the Elect) and those who simply lived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony (but were not recognized by the Church as of the Elect) had differing status within the Puritan theocracy. Closing the Puritan Church to all but the recognized elect caused conflict, as the non-elect could not have their children baptized in the Church. Within the first decades of Puritan rule, it seemed that the Church might die for lack of new members. To keep the Church alive, the "Halfway Covenant" was enacted as a compromise that allowed for baptism of infants whose parents were not of the Elect. No doubt many orthodox Puritans were enraged by this seeming dilution of Christian purity and commitment.

In today's American Church, the question of open and closed is made more problematical by the vast range of denominations and congregations. In entrepreneurial America almost anyone can start a new church. But even with open membership, Church leadership is usually closed (limited to those whose conversion and loyalty are known to those who've been given the ability to discern). A delicate balance must be maintained between being too closed (thus excluding gifted Christian brothers and sisters) and being too open (allowing the spread of harmful, heretical ideas and practices). A closed church often creates rivals, especially when power shifts in the leadership exclude ambitious or gifted people who then start their own church next door.

Open or closed? This unresolved question presents knotty problems for Christian churches, both in the past and in the present.

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