

“A Holy Congregation”

A Sermon on Article Twenty-Seven of the Belgic Confession.

Texts: Hebrews 4:14-5:10; Jeremiah 17:5-10

Article 27 - The Catholic Christian Church

We believe and profess one catholic or universal church,¹ which is a holy congregation and assembly² of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ,³ are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.⁴

This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects.⁵ This holy church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world,⁶ although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man.⁷ Thus during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord kept for Himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal.⁸

Moreover, this holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.⁹ However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.¹⁰

¹ Gen 22:18; Is 49:6; Eph 2:17-19 ² Ps 111:1; Jn 10:14, 16; Eph 4:3-6; Heb 12:22-23 ³ Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21
⁴ Eph 1:13, 4:30 ⁵ 2 Sam 7:16; Ps 89:36, 110:4; Mt 28:18, 20; Lk 1:32 ⁶ Ps 46:5; Mt 16:18 ⁷ Is 1:9; 1 Pt 3:20; Rev 11:7 ⁸ Mt 23:8; Jn 4:21-23; Rom 10:12-13 ⁹ Ps 119:63; Acts 4:32; Eph 4:4

The New Testament has no category for someone who is a believer in Jesus Christ but who is not also a member of a local church. The reason for this is so obvious that we take it for granted. Since all true believers become members of the body of Christ by virtue of their union with Christ through faith, the New Testament assumes that those who are members of Christ's body will quite naturally identify with a local assembly of those who likewise believe in Jesus and confess him as Lord before the unbelieving world. But many Americans have different assumptions.

Given the rugged individualism of American culture and our innate suspicion of authority and institutions, many Americans who consider themselves faithful Bible-believing Christians, make no connection whatsoever between their own personal faith in Jesus Christ and membership in a local church. This is indeed a sad state of affairs and clearly indicates that one of the most pressing issues of our day is the general ignorance of the doctrine of the church and the necessity of membership in a local congregation of fellow like-minded believers. In fact, John Calvin writes in his commentary on Isaiah, “We cannot become acceptable to God without being united in one and the same faith, that is, without

being members of the church.”¹ These two things, “justification by grace alone through faith alone,” and membership in Christ’s church are inseparable for Calvin, because the Bible clearly indicates that all those whom our Lord justifies through faith, he also gathers together in a visible assembly.

We move into a new section of our confession of faith (articles twenty-seven-through thirty-two) which deals with the doctrine of the church. This rather extensive treatment of the biblical teaching regarding the church and the implications that this has for us as God’s people, might come as a surprise to you given the fact that it is not a major category for American evangelicals, who—being influenced by the democratic ideal and egalitarianism, are a bit squeamish to talk about this doctrine such as we find it in our confession.

Why is this? Well, to talk about the doctrine of the church means that at some point we must talk about why one church is more faithful to Scripture than other churches and this, quite understandably, makes people a bit uncomfortable. To talk about the doctrine of the church is to talk about what doctrines must be believed, how the church is to be governed, and why all Christians are bound to join Christ’s church. But in this day and age, talk about which church is “more biblical” certainly tends to divide us rather than unite us, and this is, in many circles, tantamount to committing the unpardonable sin.

And this is precisely why American evangelicals don’t like to talk about the church. People don’t want to be told that they have to join a local assembly of like-minded believers and then submit to those leaders whom God has called and placed over them for the care of their souls. Our contemporaries are much more interested with how their church meets their needs, as opposed to whether or not what it teaches is biblical. In our culture, people pick churches based upon the programs they offer, how entertaining the services are, if the worship music sounds like their favorite FM station and how funny, charismatic, and relevant the pastor is. When a church fails to do these things (or else when a newer, flashier, church comes on the scene), people simply pick up and move on. But none of these things are mentioned in our confession and the categories which are discussed in our confession (the nature of the church, the obligation of its members, the marks of the church, the government and officers of the church, and then the discipline of the church) make Americans very uneasy, even though these matters are often something we may have never really considered.

This unease is evident in several ways. A generation ago, most churches identified themselves through a denominational label—Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Methodist. Such a label itself is an expression of how one understands the church. Now it seems, churches have chucked their denominational labels in favor of trendy names or names associated with the community in which they happen to be located.² Then, there is the uniquely American phenomena of independent, non-denominational churches which usually emphasize some odd and quirky doctrine or else develop in the shadow of some charismatic leader, who finds it easier to exercise his “charismatic” leadership free from the constraints of traditional denominational structures or biblically-structured church government centered in a plurality of elders.

But although our confession is amazingly relevant in our current situation, our confession was not written to correct uniquely American disinterest in the doctrine of the church.

¹ Cited in Graham Miller, Calvin’s Wisdom (Banner, 1992), p.52.

² See my essay, “The Church of the Highest Common Denominator,” available on-line at <http://spindleworks.com/library/riddlebarger/denom.htm>

Therefore, we must consider the historical context in which the articles in our confession dealing with the church were written to fully appreciate why our confession speaks as it does. When Guido De Bres completed our confession in 1561, both the Roman Catholic Church and the Anabaptists are clearly in his mind. On the one hand, Rome considered all Protestants to be dangerous schismatics who not only attacked key Roman doctrines (the Mass, purgatory, the merit of the saints, the Roman priesthood and so on) but who, more importantly, reject that divine authority supposedly given to the Roman church by Jesus to exercise the keys of the kingdom on his behalf. Roman Catholic apologists repeatedly made the argument that the rejection of the Roman church's authority by Protestants would ultimately lead to anarchy and rebellion against all God-given structures of society, such as the authority of the state and sanctity of the family.

The obvious illustration of this kind of anarchy is the disaster which occurred in 1534-1535, when Anabaptist radicals led by John of Leyden took over the entire city of Münster, confiscated church property, desecrated the altars of the churches, burned all books, began practicing polygamy, and then finally, executed all those within the city who dared challenge the leadership of John the prophet and his henchmen. In the words of one historian, the commandment not to murder became the reason to kill all those who oppose you. The commandment not to commit adultery became the grounds to take another man's wife as your own.³ According to Rome, the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster is the prime example of the potential fate of any city which renounces Rome in favor of an alliance with a Protestant prince.

What happened in the city of Münster during the two years of Anabaptist rule shocked all of Europe to its very core. The Anabaptist kingdom was an assault upon all areas of life, including the church, the state and the family. Lutheran and Reformed churches loudly condemned the Anabaptists and their leaders in the most vehement of terms. Both Luther and Melancthon called for the execution of all surviving leaders of the revolt. Indeed, after the city had been retaken, the appointed means of death for the prophet John and his cohorts was to be torn apart by red-hot tongs for one hour, before finally being stabbed in the heart.⁴ The Reformers saw this as a suitable punishment since the crime was not just heresy, but anarchy. The Anabaptist kingdom of Münster was a tragic illustration of what might happen to those who cut themselves loose from the authority of the Roman church.

This is why De Bres must not only refute the Roman Catholic conception that the institutional church (the Roman Catholic Church) is the body of Christ and that place where the kingdom of God is made manifest, he must at the same time refute the Anabaptist insistence that the church is led by prophets, who are filled with the Holy Spirit, and who demonstrate their faithfulness to the gospel by leading all true believers away from undue involvement in the world and its various contaminations, including the institutional church. While many of the Anabaptists admired Luther's efforts to reform the church, they also felt that Luther and the Reformed churches did not go nearly far enough in their efforts. The Anabaptists thought it wrong that both the Reformed and Lutherans still baptized infants, that both assigned to the state a legitimacy which conflicted with the law of God, and that both insisted on more formalized structures for governing their churches. After all, the Anabaptists, argued, "why do you need these things when you have the leading of the Holy Spirit?" This explains why our confession goes into such detail not only about the doctrine of the church and the way in which it should be governed, but also in setting forth the responsibilities of its members.

³ See the book by Anthony Arthur, The Tailor-King: The Rise and Fall of the Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999)

⁴ Arthur, The Tailor-King, p. 176.

Given the fact that many of us have been raised with a more Anabaptistic conception of the church, and given the fact that many of us have never really considered the topic before, it will be to our benefit to carefully examine what the Scriptures teach in this regard as summarized by our confession throughout articles twenty-seven through thirty-two. Our confession divides the topic of the Catholic Church into three main sections; the first section deals with the nature of the church and its place in redemptive history, the second section deals with Christ's preservation of his church, while the third section deals with the universal (or catholic) character of the church.⁵

We turn, then, to the first part of article twenty-seven, which summarizes the biblical teaching regarding the nature of the church. The ramifications of this for us as members of the church will be set out in the rest of the articles which follow.

Our confession defines the church as follows: "We believe and profess one catholic or universal church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit."

It may come as a surprise that two of the proof texts listed by our confession for the first point made—"we believe and confess one catholic or universal church"—come from the Old Testament. In Genesis 22:18, The Lord declares to Abraham that "*all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.*" The promised blessing—interpreted by Paul to mean that all who believe in Jesus Christ are children of Abraham and are therefore heirs to the promise (Romans 4:11)—was a key feature of the Abrahamic covenant, made by God with Abraham some 1500 years before the coming of Jesus Christ and the day of Pentecost. Notice the fundamental covenant promise—which is sworn by YHWH himself on sovereign oath—is not that "I am your God and will give you a personal relationship with me," but rather "I will be your God and you (you and your family and descendants after you) will be my people." At its very heart, the covenant oath underlying the covenant of grace entails God saving a "people," not just isolated individuals. This clearly implies that God has one people and that the church predates Pentecost.

This is why Reformed theologians argue that as Old Testament revelation progressively unfolds, the first church is the family (Adam-Eve), then the clan (the patriarchs), then the nation of Israel, before the church is finally revealed as the mystical body of Jesus Christ (i.e. Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 11-12) at Pentecost, when God's people are now called out from among all the Gentile nations. Indeed, Pentecost marks the dawn of the age of the Spirit which is characterized by the fact all believers in Jesus Christ are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, not just certain individuals for a time as in the Old Testament. All believers in Jesus are now said to be living stones in God's temple, now indwelt and filled with the glory of the blessed Holy Spirit in whom we are all baptized. This is undoubtedly why the great messianic prophecy of Isaiah 49:6, indicates that this universalizing of the promise, lies at the very heart of the messianic age. "*I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.*"

Looking back at this from the perspective of its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 2:11-22

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (that done in the body by the hands of

⁵ Beets sees only two divisions, but three is clearly more appropriate. See Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, p. 205.

men)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

The coming of Jesus Christ marks the inclusion of Gentiles into the one people of God (Israel in the Old Testament, the church in the New). We Gentiles, who had no hope, have been made fellow citizens with true Israel, and now are joined together with countless others to become a holy temple in which the Spirit of God dwells, in other words, the church.

There are a number of other things to be considered in this regard as well. First, the church is said to be holy because all of those who are truly part of it (and we'll talk more about this when we discuss the difference between the visible and the invisible church momentarily) have their sins forgiven and are covered with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. All those who are members of the church are presently being sanctified, which is why Paul can state in Ephesians 5:25 and following, that husbands are to

love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Because the church is holy by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, God is even now preparing all of its members for the great marriage supper of Christ the lamb. All those justified, are being sanctified, ultimately to be glorified.

When our confession speaks of “true Christian believers” the implication is that there are “false” Christian believers. This brings us to the distinction often made between the visible church and the invisible church. The visible church is this group gathered here this morning (along with others just like us), who together profess faith in Jesus Christ, are baptized into its membership, who desire to worship as prescribed in God’s word. Such a church is also organized along the lines prescribed in Scripture, with ministers of word and sacrament, elders and deacons performing those tasks assigned to them by God.

The invisible church, on the other hand, is the church as God sees it, and is therefore, composed of all those who are truly elect.⁶ This means that there are people who profess faith in Christ and are baptized but who, sadly, do not believe the gospel and are not of the elect—this is why in 2 Peter 1:10, Peter

⁶ Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, p.206; cf. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 565-567.

exhorts all Christians to make their calling and election sure. The elect heed this warning, while those who are not, don't. This also means that not all of God's elect are members of Christ's church. But this does not negate the fact that the invisible church (the elect) assumes a visible form (the congregation here assembled).⁷ Thus all true believers are obligated to join the visible church, despite the fact that the visible church is filled with sinners, unbelievers, and remains imperfect in a number of ways.

Thus the tension with which our confession must deal is that there are people who claim to be Christians and who are not, even though they are part of the visible church, and there are people who are truly Christ's but not members of his visible church. While the church is to be on guard for false teachers and those who by their behavior demonstrate that they are not truly believers (these are people who behave like pagans and are unrepentant about it, and not to be confused with repentant sinners who struggle with their sins), it is the Lord of the church who takes to himself the task of separating the wheat from the tares on the last day (Matthew 13:24 ff). But for all those who believe the gospel and who are numbered among the elect—the message is simple: You are obligated to join Christ's church and be a faithful member. In fact, the author of Hebrews exhorts all Christians, "*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching* (Hebrews 10:25)." Church membership is not an option. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ and are part of his mystical body, you are obligated to join a local congregation of like-minded believers, the visible manifestation of our Lord's body.

That being said, there are indeed times in our lives when we are in transition between churches and there are people who have been so hurt by other Christians, or who have had such a bad experience in the church that they are better off to away from the church—for a time. We once played a song by the Dead Artist Syndrome on the *White Horse Inn* entitled *Bride Song* which includes the lyric, "Jesus I love you, but I cannot understand your wife." The fact that such songs are written and that some of us can identify with the song writer is a sad reality of church life. But these are exceptional cases and the rule is that if you are Christ's you are obligated to join a local church. How you find such a church is discussed in article twenty-nine (the marks of a true church).

Since the church is the *ecclesia* or the assembly of believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ, together we believe and confess that our "entire salvation is in Jesus Christ, [because] are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit." Thus our membership in a local church is the necessary expression of what we believe and the means, in part, by which we confess our faith to the world around us. In this case, the church is that body of believers (in many locations) which gather together on the Lord's Day to confess to each other and to the world around us that we are God's people, that we are justified sinners who have no hope of heaven apart from the doing and dying of Jesus, and that we are indwelt and sealed by the blessed Holy Spirit until the great and glorious day of our redemption. Being justified by grace through faith, we gather to sing God's praises, to pray, to hear his word, receive his sacraments, and give our gifts of thanksgiving along with our sacrifice of praise. In fact, according to Peter, this is the end for which we have been redeemed. In 1 Peter 2:9-10 we read,

but you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 566.

Notice, too, it is the common faith which we believe and confess which is the foundation of the church and which binds us together as a body of believers. The church is not to be formed around felt-needs of crass and narcissistic consumers using marketing demographics to attract fellow consumers as the church growth types tell us. This only divides people along racial, social, cultural and economic lines, when as Paul told us in Ephesians 2, the ministry of Christ is to remove all of these sinful human barriers and unite people, who would otherwise have little in common, into the mystical body of Jesus Christ. This is why Christ's church is described as a holy congregation. The foundation is Jesus Christ, who is our righteousness, and our common confession of faith in the Savior is what unites together, and not our ages, our race or social standing, nor our common interests, likes and dislikes. In Jesus Christ, we are a holy congregation, because we are all members of his body and covered with his perfect righteousness.

The second main point made by our confession has to do with the fact that the Lord of the church will preserve the church, even in times of great peril.

Our confession describes God's preservation of his people as follows, "this church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man. Thus during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord kept for Himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal." While Americans look for God's blessing in terms of the numerical size of the church and the grandeur of its buildings, or even in the popularity and success of its pastor or its influence on the evangelical subculture, our confession points us in a much different direction—the church's faithfulness to God's word, especially during times of great trial and testing. And this faithfulness of the church, comes about not because we are faithful, but because Jesus' kingly rule (mentioned here in passing) ensures that he will always have a people for his name, always on the earth. It is his priestly intercession for us which effectually ensures that his people persevere and that his church endures. Thus the Lord and head of the church preserves the church. This is why article twenty-seven has to be understood in light of article twenty-six. Christ's intercession on behalf of his people ensures that the church will endure.

In 1 Kings 19:9b-18), we read of the prophet Elijah's lament:

I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.

As Reformed Christians living in a land of Arminian, Roman, Dispensational and Pentecostal churches and in an age which is becoming increasingly pagan and hostile to Christianity in general and Reformed Christianity in particular, some of us may be tempted to offer a lament similar to Elijah's. Let us not forget the Lord's answer to his downcast prophet: "I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him."

From this it is clear that God has his people, and that he will preserve them to the end despite our efforts to help him out. As we will see when we get to article twenty-nine, a true church bears certain marks: faithful preaching of the word, administration of the sacraments and the exercise of discipline. Thus our Lord Jesus, who is both king and head of his church, will ensure that such a church will remain upon the earth no matter how small or persecuted it may be. This is why we should not lament the state of the church as much as be reassured by our Lord's two-fold promise, "the gates of hell will not prevail against my church," and "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." Jesus will preserve all those for

whom he has died. He will not allow any part of his body to be amputated or to die of disease.

Finally, our confession briefly takes up the subject of the universality (catholicity) of the church.

Our confession states in this regard, “Moreover, this holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.” We can read this assertion in both a broad and narrow sense.

In a broad sense there are countless Christian believers throughout the world who confess the name of Jesus and identify themselves as his followers, but who are certainly not Reformed in doctrine. We are not to question whether or not these people are truly Christians. If their confession is orthodox, whether or not they are true believers is God’s business, not ours. Furthermore, we should be glad that such people exist, despite our doctrinal differences with them. We consider them to be our brothers and sisters in Christ, even though the churches they attend cannot be regarded as true churches.

But from a narrow perspective, as Reformed Christians, we can see the universality of our own church in the fact that throughout the world, as well as across the ages, there are countless believers who affirm the same doctrinal standards we do, who believe the same things we do and who confess with us a common faith—that set forth in the Three Forms of Unity. This is the point that our confession is now making. Such a church cannot be confined to one congregation, one group, one country, one denomination.

This means that no single Reformed congregation or denomination represents the whole of the Reformed church. The name “Reformed” extends to all those churches and denominations which confess the same faith we do. It is because our confessions summarize what the Bible teaches, that through believing and confessing what is in these confessions, we are united together with other like-minded believers around the entire world. It is easy to think that we are all alone—but such is not the case. There are hundreds of Reformed Christians throughout our area, as well as millions throughout the world gathering this day for worship. Thus our unity as Reformed Christians is not a matter of denominational loyalty but of a common confession of faith in a crucified and risen savior as expressed in the Three Forms of **Unity**. It is our doctrine which unites us together in heart and will, and that doctrine centers in the sacrificial death and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, who has founded his church, and called us to be part of it.

And what a privilege it is to be part of a holy congregation, where we hear God’s word, receive his sacraments, sing his praises, where we pray together and enjoy the fellowship of that same savior and all of his people, whom he has called to this place and this local church. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are a holy congregation, “united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.”