

Vol. 11, No. 1

Ordained Servant



The 2001 General Assembly of the OPC

Published by

The Committee on Christian Education

of

THE ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

January, 2002

ORDAINED SERVANT

Statement Of Purpose

Ordained Servant exists to provide solid materials for the equipping of office-bearers to serve more faithfully. The goal of this journal is to assist the ordained servants of the church to become more fruitful in their particular ministry so that they in turn will be more capable to prepare God's people for works of service. To attain this goal *Ordained Servant* will include articles (both old and new) of a theoretical and practical nature with the emphasis tending toward practical articles wrestling with perennial and thorny problems encountered by office-bearers.

Editorial Policy

1. *Ordained Servant* publishes articles inculcating biblical presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of *Ordained Servant* or of the Church.
2. *Ordained Servant* occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Ordained Servant* does not intend to take a partisan stand, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

Published for the Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church
under direction of
Dr. James Gidley, Mr. David Winslow, Rev. William Shishko and Rev. Stephen Pribble

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Ordained Servant (ISSN: 1525-3503) is published quarterly by the Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Copies to ordained officers of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church are paid for by the Committee. It is also available to others in the U.S. who remit \$12 per year; foreign subscribers remit \$17. Periodicals postage is paid at Carson, ND. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Ordained Servant*, 5645 73rd St. SW, Carson, ND 58529.

Please send materials intended for possible publication in *Ordained Servant* to the Editor, G. I. Williamson, 406 Normal College Ave., Sheldon, IA 51201. (Or send it in a text file, by Email to: williamson.1@opc.org). Please send all requests for additional copies of back issues, to the distributor, Mr. Stephen Sturlaugson, 5645 73rd St. SW, Carson, ND 58529. Telephone: 701-622-3862 (Email: Sturlaugson.1@opc.org), or you can download any and all back issues of *Ordained Servant* from The Orthodox Presbyterian Church's Web site on the Internet at: <http://www.opc.org>.



With this issue we gratefully begin our 11th year of publication with the humble prayer that the Lord will use it to build up his church. Regular readers of this periodical will notice a significant change in style. It is our hope that it will make it easier to read. But please let us know if you think we've made a mistake.



One of the important events for this past year, as I see it, is the new level of fraternal fellowship that was entered into by the Canadian Reformed Church federation and our own Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It was my privilege to represent the OPC at the Neerlandia Synod in Alberta at which the CanRC reached the decision to enter into full ecclesiastical fellowship with us. It was my desire then—which I expressed to that body—that we make this new level of fellowship as meaningful as possible. One concern expressed by our Canadian Reformed brothers was the desire for further discussion in those areas in which there is difference between us. It is my hope that with counsel from the Christian Education Committee the *Ordained Servant* may help to provide opportunities for such discussions. And to mark the beginning of such efforts we feature as the lead article in this issue the paper presented at the 2001 ICRC by Dr. James de Jong. This paper was, in part, a response to the paper on church unity that was presented by our Church in an earlier ICRC. We hope that all our pastors and elders will give this a careful reading. And we welcome constructive interaction with it.



Of deep concern to both pastors and elders are the members of our churches who have not yet made a public profession of their faith. To help us focus on this subject we have three articles on this subject in this issue, each of which is written by a pastor of considerable experience in dealing with this concern. We were not able to include a chart by Rev. John Hilbelink in which he shows the schedule of memory work that he uses in Second Parish OPC in Portland. He would probably be glad to furnish you a copy if you want one. Also worthy of special notice is the very fine *Memory Work Notebook*, by PCA pastor Paul Settle. I regard this as one of the best things that GCP has ever published (though it is too much overlooked). There is no greater need in the church today than the need for well catechized covenant children. We hope that these article—and suggested resources—will help.



“Christ is the head of the church. So ultimately there is the most concentrated unity of government in the church of Christ. He alone is King. Any infringement upon this sovereignty belonging to Christ is a violation of what is basic and central in the government of the church. It follows that all government in the church must adhere to the pattern of a cone which has its apex in Christ.

Christ also instituted the apostolate with authority delegated from him (Matt. 16:18, 19; c.f. Jn. 20:21,23; Eph. 2:19-22). This apostolic authority is exercised now only through the inscripturated Word. But in the sphere of dele-

gated authority the apostolate is supreme and will continue to be so to the end of time. This is the way in which the Holy Spirit, as the vicar of Christ abiding in and with the church, exercises his function in accordance with Christ's promise. He seals the apostolic witness by his own testimony and illumines the people of God in the interpretation and application of the same.

Subordinately, however, in terms of Matt. 16:19, the hegemony of the apostolate is undeniable and it exemplifies the descending hierarchy which Christ has established.

There is also in the New Testament institution the delegated authority of the presbyterate, always subject to the apostolic institution, to the Holy Spirit who inspired the apostles (cf. John 16:13; 20:22), and ultimately to Christ as the King and head of the church, but nevertheless supreme in this sphere of government.

When these principles of gradation and communion are appreciated, and when co-ordinated with the other considerations already established, especially that of the unity of the body of Christ, we appear to be provided with a pattern that points to the necessity of making the presbyterate as inclusive as is consistent with loyalty to Christ and the faith of the gospel. In a word, we are pointed to the necessity of unity in government, a unity that is violated when Churches of Christ adhering to the faith in its purity and integrity are not thus united.”

– John Murray's *Collected Writings*, Vol. 1, pp. 271-272.

Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church

A Reformed (Continental) Perspective

by

Dr. J. de Jong



Synopsis

The object of this paper is to present a summary of the scriptural view on the unity of Christ's church from a Reformed perspective.¹ The overview is divided into three sections, a doctrinal, church governmental and practical section.

The first section of the paper seeks to isolate the dynamic concept of the church as reflected in the continental tradition. This concept of the church, which emphasises the present progressive act of the gathering of the church by Christ, allows for a fresh perspective on the pursuit of Reformed ecumenicity. It will assist to engender a degree of openness among true believers through which they are ready to enhance existing local and federational ties with new and richer alliances that bring the unity of the church to clearer expression.

The second section deals with the church's history and government. It seeks to isolate those areas that require further investigation on the road to stronger ties of federational and international fellowship among Reformed churches. The paper defends the need for new formulae of understanding which would open the way for greater inter-federational fellow-

ship. One issue requiring further investigation is the nature and extent of church power.

The practical section enumerates several problem areas that arise in the local congregation with regard to maintaining the unity of the church. The central thesis of this section, drawn up in analogy to the previous section, asserts that the unity of the local congregation takes precedence over patterns of unity developed on national and international levels.

Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to set forth the central principles of the unity of the church from a Reformed (continental) perspective. Although my contribution takes its cue from the OPC statement on the unity of the church, I have not confined myself to interacting strictly with this document.² I opted rather to give a broader picture of what I see as a specifically Reformed approach to this issue. In the context of this broader overview, I will make reference to the state of the discussion at this point as exemplified especially in the OPC document referred to above.

My presentation has two main sections: a doctrinal and church governmental section. In the first the fundamental doctrinal and exegetical aspects to the issue of church unity will be set forth, with a special emphasis on the continental Reformed perspective. In the second, some of the implications of the position taken in the first section for church government will be considered. Finally, some practical and pastoral conclusions will be drawn from the principles uncovered in our journey.

1 Doctrinal considerations

1.1 The scriptural terms

The word 'church' comes from the Greek *kuriake*, that which belongs to the Lord. The most common designation in the Old Testament is *qâhâl Yaweh*, the assembly of the LORD. Another term commonly used is the *èdâh Yaweh*, the congregation of God. Both terms, but especially the former, have a liturgical character, and accent the coming together of God's people, and the visible communion among them, Deut 4:10, 9:10; 10:4; 18:6. In the New Testament two terms are used most often regarding the church: *ekklesia*, which is the most common LXX translation of the term *qâhâl*, and *soma tou Christou*. The first term carries forward and deepens the Old Testament idea of *qâhâl*, the second accents the fellowship and filial submission of the body un-

¹ My thanks to J.M. Batteau of the Reformed Church of Wageningen, The Netherlands, who made many valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² "Biblical Principles on the Unity of the Church" *Proceedings of the International Conference of Reformed Churches October 15-23, 1997* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1997) 97-102

der the one Head. The term *ekklesia* can refer to a local congregation, or a part of a congregation, or it can refer to the sum aggregate of congregations at any given point of time, Acts 5:11, 1 Cor 16:19, Gal 1:13, Eph 1:22. The term *soma tou Christou* is used for a local church, 1 Cor 12:28, but also used for the church as an aggregate of congregations everywhere in the world, Eph 1:23. This term especially accents the inner unity of the church of God.

Next to these a host of images are presented in Scripture concerning the church of God. The church is a vine branch, a bride, a flock, a city, the salt of the earth, a royal nation, a holy people, a building, a temple, and so on.³

The images show forth the church's living and vibrant character, but also illustrate its institutional and official sides. In fact, the images are very broad, and indicate that the church itself is a divinely created reality with many facets. These images presuppose and confirm the church's unity. Similarly, the images used in the gospels for the kingdom of heaven underscore the same idea: the kingdom is a household, a net, a grain of mustard seed, a vine, and so on. In every case, the unity and continuity of the kingdom and its inherent parts is clearly indicated. And while the kingdom of God cannot be directly identified with the church, the analogy between them is so strong that the attributes of the kingdom often apply to the church as well.⁴

³ P.S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 28-65

⁴ J. Faber, "Church and Kingdom" in idem., *Essays on Reformed Doctrine*,

This divinely shaped reality of the church is essentially a matter of faith before sight, and is hence a faith assertion made on the basis of the teaching of Scripture. We see many forms of organizational entities that form parts of Christ's church, and many more that purport to do so. Whether they actually do so is a matter requiring careful discernment as enjoined by God in his Word. One does not first follow what one sees in describing the church, but what Scripture teaches concerning it. The scriptural teaching regarding the church is well summarized in both the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds.

1.2 The Creeds

In the Apostles' Creed the church confesses: *Credo...sanctam ecclesiam catholicam*. With many authors I take this as: "I believe *the* holy catholic church," so highlighting the aspect of the church's unity.⁵

There is at any point in time only one church in essence. Next to unity, holiness and catholicity are marked as central characteristics of the church. The Nicene Creed adds two elements of significance: "We believe in...one holy catholic and apostolic church." The first element is the phrase "We believe *in one* (Greek: *eis mian...*) church", and second, the addition of the characteristic of apostolicity. This latter attribute may be regarded as a further elaboration and qualification of what is already included in the

(Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1990) 131-178

⁵ J. Pearson, *An Exposition of the Creed*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1870), 590

three attributes as confessed in the Apostles' Creed.⁶

In what sense can we endorse the Nicene Creed and its original Greek formulation, especially with the word *in* as part of the statement? Certainly this cannot be taken in the sense which was repudiated repeatedly in the western tradition, *viz.* that one can put our trust in the church next to God and divinize it as a separate projection of God himself. It was the very tendency of the church to do so that led the western tradition to emphasize the absence of the term *in* from the western Credo.⁷ But if with due qualification the particle *in* is connected to the institution of the offices, the church's apostolicity and the work of God through people, then the phrase "I believe *in* the catholic church" has its proper place. It is precisely in the terms of the Nicene Creed, Christendom's most universal creed, that one understands the church with which we deal and which we confess as primarily God's work, fulfilling a divine purpose and goal.⁸

⁶ It does not appear correct to take apostolicity as an attribute of lesser significance, as J. Heyns does, cf. J. A. Heyns, *The Church*, (translated by D. Roy Briggs, Pretoria: N.G. Kerkboekhandel, 1980) 144

⁷ Calvin followed Augustine on this point, and held that to say "Credo in ecclesiam" was a "loquutio impropria", cf. *Institutes* IV.i.2 (OS V, 3). However, Pearson is probably closer to the truth in stating "...nor does the article *in* added or subtracted make any difference." Pearson, 591, note 53. I would suggest that the particle highlights the special character of the church as being God's creation.

⁸ H. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, Vol 1, (Kampen: Kok, 1928), 328-331

With the Nicene Creed, we can assert a constant realized unity of the church in God's eyes through the infallible work of his Word and Spirit, and incorporate in this unity the attributes of the infallibility (*infallibilitas*) and the indefectibility (*indefectibilitas*) of the church.⁹ Thus, the phrase: "We believe in the church" points to the infallible and insuperable character of God's work in the gathering of his church.

Holding the church to be a divine creation, one must think about the church and its unity in terms of the one triune God, its Creator, Redeemer and Renewer. The church is the city and people of God the Father, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Seeing the church as the city of God, one may see the Holy Spirit as a river of life continually flowing through it from the throne of God. Confessing the church as the body of Christ, one may say that the Holy Spirit is the sinews and nerves of love uniting the members of the body to the one Head, in the same way he unites the Persons of the Trinity. As God is one, and one in three Persons, so the church is one in all its forms and manifestations, pluralities and ministries, one in its members, and one as members in its Head.¹⁰

1.3 The attributes

⁹ H. Heppe and E. Bizer, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1958) 538

¹⁰ K.L. Schmidt notes that the noun *ekklesia* most often takes the genitive *tu theou*, so connecting the term to the work of the one triune God, G. Kittel (ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. III, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 506

The four attributes of the church must be kept in view in articulating a perspective on the unity of the church. For example, one cannot play out apostolicity against catholicity. These attributes are not to be seen as being in some sort of creative balance, a state of heightened tension with varying degrees of elasticity. The creedal formulations capture the central thrust of Scripture on the church: the attributes interpenetrate each other and form a living part of one united and integrated whole. This will govern our thinking as we proceed to delineate the attributes, and especially that of unity, in greater detail.

The sanctity (*sanctitas*) of the church implies that the community of the faithful has been set apart in the world, and placed on the road to the revelation of the full glory of God. Only those who are cleansed from sin and reborn to God can participate in the revelation of his glory. One may take the holy church as the congregation of those washed in the blood and Spirit of Christ, anointed through his Spirit to serve his cause in the world. Through the forgiveness of sins, the believers may not only be enlisted to the revelation of God's glory, but they are also guided and protected in it, 1 Pet 1: 1-3.

The catholicity (*catholicitas*) of the church signifies that this assembly spans all nations and peoples of the earth. Although there may be a variety of expressions of the catholic faith, ultimately there is one faith, and one confession of the truth. Thus, varying modes of confession never take away from the underlying unity of faith experienced in the church at all times. In the words of the Belgic Confession, Article 27: "...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."¹¹

Catholicity in this sense also includes an obligation on the part of the church. Preserving the catholic faith means preserving the unity of the true faith, 1 Cor 12:4, 1 Cor 12:11; Acts 2:42. Paul prays that the true believers may be filled with all of the fullness of God, and that they may grow in this fullness so that they may be entirely filled with the fullness of God, Eph 3: 14-19, Col 2:9, 18,19.¹² The church shares the fullness of Christ, and so it is catholic, Eph 1:23.

The apostolicity (*apostolicitas*) of the church recalls that it has its foundation and essential unity in the teaching of the apostles as handed down in sacred Scripture. The body of teaching which the church confesses is marked by an inner unity, a cohesiveness of teaching and moral directives setting forth a unified and holistic pattern of living in the world. Paul often calls his message the "sound doctrine", the "good confession" and "the teaching which accords with godliness", 1 Tim 4:6, 6:3, 6:12, 13; 2 Tim 4:3.¹³ As the gospel is one, so the Christian life reflects an inner unity of purpose and direction, cf. Jas 1:4.

¹¹ I quote the version as found in the *Book of Praise. Anglo Genevan Psalter*, (revised edition, Winnipeg: Premier, 1994) 462

¹² Note in this regard the expression of Paul in Eph. 3:19: *hina plerothete eis pan to pleromatou theou* where the preposition *eis* signifies movement to final purpose or goal.

¹³ All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version (second edition) unless otherwise indicated.

The church is founded on the teaching of the apostles, with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone, Eph 2:20. The apostles form the foundation of the church because they were eyewitnesses to Christ's victory over sin and death, and were especially commissioned by the Spirit to write down the things they saw and heard, 2 Pet 1: 16-21. Their testimony, built on the Old Testament Scriptures and the record concerning the ministry of Jesus Christ, forms the sole basis and foundation for the life and practice of the church in the world.

1.4 The Unity of the Attributes

We have stated that these attributes cannot be set in opposition to each other, but must be seen as complementary. The positive side of this may also be added: the attributes not only complement and interpenetrate each other, but in themselves reflect an inner unity. One attribute is the corollary of the other in such a way that any set of pairs of them are reciprocal. One attribute cannot exist without the other. So unity presupposes catholicity, and catholicity presupposes unity. Similarly, apostolicity incorporates sanctity and sanctity cannot be conceived without apostolicity. And these pairs, or any other combination of them, cannot exist without the other pair: unity and catholicity as chief indicators of the life of the church cannot be conceived without apostolicity and sanctity as characteristics of its teaching, and so on.

1.5 Unity as attribute

Part of the essence of the church is that it is one body. This is an integral part of the church's confession in both symbols and is an inescapable truth of Scripture.

Paul speaks of the one body of the Lord, and always holds up the unity of the church as an existing reality to the believers: "[T]here is one Lord, one faith, one baptism" Eph 4:1-6. In these references it is not a matter of an ideal to strive for, but a code to live by, and perhaps stronger, a genuine state of affairs actually in existence through the saving work of Christ. Unity is more a reality than an ideal in Paul, a given gift rather than a good to be attained through human effort. He says: "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it," 1 Cor 12: 27. He calls the church the true circumcision, indicating that through divine hand the church has been grafted into Christ as one body, Phil 3:3.¹⁴

Another image strongly accenting the unity of the church is that of a building. Various workers may contribute to the construction of the building, but it is essentially one building, 1 Cor 3: 9. The image applies to the local church and to the church in its universal or catholic dimension. Peter says to the church universal: "...and like as living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house..." 1 Pet 2:5. Paul accents the unity of the building in Eph 2: 19,20: "Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord..." (NKJV). Through all ages, times and places, God is constructing one new humankind, united in the last Adam, reflecting his glory in its appearance in the world. The eschatological image of this building is a city built on a

mountain, the new Jerusalem which is both a bride adorned for her husband, and a perfectly symmetrical building in which all aspects and parts reflect a deep, inner harmonious whole, Rev 21:10ff.

The unity of the church has its roots in the unity of the one triune God Himself.¹⁵ Yahweh reveals himself as one Lord, who alone is to be worshipped and praised, Deut 6: 1- 4. And in his self-revelation Jesus announced, "I and the Father are one" Jn 10:30. With B. Kamphuis, I take the references to the unity between the Father and the Son in John's gospel as directed towards the external work of the Father and the Son (*opera ad extra*) rather than referring to the internal and substantial unity of the divine Persons.¹⁶ In these Johannine passages, Jesus repeatedly asserts his unity with the Father as a mark of both his speech and action, see Jn 5:19, 5:30, Jn 10: 30,38. Alongside the unity of substance there is a bonded unity of purpose, goal and direction in all deeds going outward (*ad extra*). This bonded unity forms an image that the church must imitate and reflect in its own life.

So, too, the Spirit is one in being and acting, and one in his

¹⁵ So H. Bavinck, *De katholiciteit van Christendom en kerk* (Kampen: G. Ph. Zalsman, 1888) 15. Bavinck says (my translation): "The unity of the church ...flows directly forth out of the unity of God, out of the unity of the Mediator of God and man, out of the unity of the Spirit, out of the unity of the truth, out of the unity of the covenant, out of the unity of salvation."

¹⁶ B. Kamphuis, "Pleidooi voor eenheid" in J.W. Maris (ed.) *Opdat zij allen een zijn* Gereformeerd Sociaal en Economisch verbandreeks, nr. 36, (Barneveld: Vuurbaak, 1999) 17

¹⁴ The emphasis on unity as a given reality is also found in Eph. 4:1-6. On this see D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 24-25.

relation to the Son and the Father. In John's gospel, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in his name (14:26) and whom he himself sends, (15:26). This one Spirit who is in the Father and the Son will also be "in you," Jn 14:17. These words point to a spiritual unity between the Father and the Son and the chosen people of God of such a form that the unity shaped between Christ and his church, as expressed in the deeds and actions of the church, will be a reflection of the unity between Christ and his Father in heaven as exhibited in the one salvation enterprise of God.

Paul says: "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" 1 Cor 12: 4. On the basis of the *charismata* that proceed from the one Spirit of Christ, the church itself is a unity in the multiplicity of its gifts and ministries. The mature in faith, through deeds born out of the Spirit, give increasing expression to this unity, according to Paul's words: "[W]e are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love." Eph 4:16.

This unity is also a unity in the truth. There can be no false dilemma between unity and truth for the very prayer of Jesus which enjoins unity of the church also pleads for a sanctification in the truth, Jn 17:17. Paul says: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" 1 Cor 12: 3. The unity of the church will then always manifest itself in the context of a confessional unity, one of doctrine and teaching, order and practice that stamps the entire life of the church in the

world. The inner unity of the apostolic testimony itself creates its own inner unity among and in its confessors.¹⁷

Therefore, the unity of the church can not be realized with superficial platitudes or hollow phrases. There must be a true unity of the Spirit, which includes organic, institutional and corporate dimensions. Neither can this be a unity of coercion or blind submission. It must be a unity of love and voluntary submission based on the love of Christ for his church. Unity is born through on-going self-denial and constant return to the firm basis of divine instruction given in God's word. Ultimately, it is a unity of true faith and obedience.

The most concrete manifestations of the unity of the church from the perspective of Christ's work is the unity given in the holy sacraments. Both sacraments are visible signs and seals of the unity the church has with its head Jesus Christ, and so the organic unity all members have with each other. Baptism is a mark of the union with Christ which also enjoins the unity of all believers. True believers are not baptised into the name of just any prophet or teacher, but only in Christ's name, 1 Cor 1:13. Similarly, the Lord's Supper proclaims the unity of the body of Christ. The table of communion itself is an incentive for believers

to practise living fellowship with each other in word and deed.¹⁸

1.6 A living communion

The practice of the unity of the church is especially captured in the creedal phrase: I believe in the communion of saints (*Credo... sanctorum comunione*). While this term is sometimes applied to the sharing of the sacred gifts, the ordinances of the living Word and the holy sacraments, the primary focus falls on the living communion that the members of the body share and exercise together. Unity manifests itself in concrete ways of mutual support and ministry (*diakonia*). It also manifests itself in bringing to the world a united witness, the *homologia* concerning the work of Christ.

Two aspects to the unity of the church are thus directly visible: first, the unity of the members with the one head Jesus Christ, in whom each member finds all life and strength, and secondly, the communion of all members among themselves and with all true believers, through which the members are linked together by a spiritual bond of fellowship, love and service. The former may be called representative union, in which believers are united both with the crucified and the glorified body of Christ, Eph 2:16, Eph 1: 20-23. The second is the unity of the believers together, symbolized especially at the table of communion.¹⁹

¹⁸ See E. P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995) 78-82

¹⁷ See G. Van Rongen, *The Church. Its Unity in Confession and History* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1998), 41: "The oneness of the church rests upon the unity of the true faith. Oneness or unity and truth go together."

¹⁹ So E. P. Clowney, "The Biblical Theology of the Church" in D.A. Carson, (ed.) *The Church in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1987) 13-87, see especially 51-58

1.7 *The marks*

The confession of the reformation, responding to the entrenched decay of the Roman church and the rise of counter movements marked by spiritual excess, carefully articulated the marks of the church. One mark stands central in the confessions: the church preaches the true gospel of Jesus Christ; but as a corollary to this one mark the Reformed creeds add two other marks: The true church is found where the pure discipline is maintained and where the pure administration of the sacraments takes place.²⁰ The marks point to abiding norms to which the church must consistently adhere, and to which it must constantly aspire.

In the case of the attribute of unity, this implies that any part of the body of Christ must consciously and visibly seek to manifest that which is a part of its very essence. If unity is one of the building blocks of what it takes to be the church, no fellowship at any level can fail to pursue this goal. To be sure, this will always take place in the context of maintaining the sanctity and apostolicity of the church, attributes which are just as essential to the body of Christ. But true unity must be manifested as much as possible in all the spheres of activity in which the church functions.

The continental creeds of the Reformation accent this call in

²⁰ The Augsburg Confession mentions two marks: "The church is the assembly of the saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly." Cf. R. Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, (eds.), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000) 43

many ways. Article 28 of the Belgic Confession calls true believers to separate from the false church and join with the true church, "thus maintaining the unity of the church."²¹ The confession here describes concrete acts of separation and affiliation through which a line of division is clearly marked off between that which is not of God and that which comes from him, and by which an essential unity of faith is experienced and consciously maintained. The Second Helvetic Confession speaks of the continued existence of the one only church which is then spread and dispersed over the whole world.²² This one church is determined by clear marks: "Now as we acknowledge no other head of the church than Christ, so we do not acknowledge every church to be a true church which vaunts herself so to be; but we teach that to be the true church indeed in which the marks and tokens of the true church are to be found."²³ It is the church with the marks of the true preaching that seeks as much as possible to uphold the unity of the church:

"And they that are such in the church of God have all but one faith and one spirit; and therefore they worship but one God, and him alone they

²¹ For the specific context of this confession see C. Trimp, *Kerk in aanbouw. Haar presentie en pretentie* (Goes: Oosterbaan en Le Cointre, 1988) 67

²² Confessio Helvetica, II, ch.17. Cf. P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom III*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877) 831ff

²³ I follow Schaff's translation, cf P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. III, 872. For the Latin text, cf. E.F. Karl Muller, *Bekennnisschriften der Reformierten Kirche*, (Zürich: Theologische Buchhandlung, reprint of 1903 edition, 1987) 170-221.

serve in spirit and in truth ...praying to him alone through Jesus Christ the only mediator and intercessor; and they seek not life or justice but only in Christ, and by faith in him because they do acknowledge Christ the only head and foundation of his church... and besides, by unfeigned love joining themselves to all the members of Christ... by continuing in the bond of peace and holy unity."²⁴

The Scots Confession of 1560 also introduces the idea of the 'notes' or marks of the church, with a description similar to that found in the Belgic Confession.²⁵

In the same context it draws attention to the presence of these marks particularly in the local context, where the ministers are planted, and where the Word is preached according to the doctrine contained in the holy Scriptures. The Scots Confession also calls for a careful discernment of existing church bodies, and a conscious decision to align with the true church, the standard being the Word of God in holy Scripture. Separations are thus acknowledged as self-evident, but this does not negate an inner unity of those in the bond of the truth. The confession echoes the words of John: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain, that they all are not of us." 1 Jn 2:19.

²⁴ Schaff, Vol III, 872

²⁵ "Of the Notes by the quhilk the trew Kirk is decerned frome the fals." As found in W. Niessel, *Bekennnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche* (Zürich: Zollikon, 1946) 102

Clearly, the essential unity of the church is spiritual, and not structural or external. However, the organizational aspects of unity cannot be disparaged.²⁶ Coupled with a spiritual unity one may expect and ought to pursue an organizational and institutional unity in such a way that the spiritual oneness is clearly manifested to the world as not simply a unity of words but one of deeds. The very images of body and building or temple, so crucial to the New Testament view of the church, substantiate this claim. While inner spiritual unity always remains the driving force and essential catalyst of the church's unity, this spiritual unity must be complemented by outward marks which pursue the most intimate forms of fellowship possible in any given context.

1.8 A dynamic aspect

How can we integrate the abiding divine command with the historical response as we meet it in the course of time and from place to place in our world? How do God's eternal commands translate into concrete *hic et nunc* statements in our space and time world? A noted continental scholar who developed this aspect of the doctrine of the church was K. Schilder (1890-1952). Severing himself from Kuypers's static model of the church with its emphasis on the church's plurality, and at the same time opposing the actualistic model of K. Barth and the neo-orthodoxy of the day, Schilder highlighted what might be called the dynamic

²⁶E.P. Clowney, *The Church*, 78-79: "We are driven to consider not only what the Lord calls us to *do* together, but also what he calls us to *be* together."

aspect in the gathering of the church.²⁷

This dynamic aspect of the gathering of the church involves an attempt to articulate the unity between God's eternal counsel and his call in the *hic et nunc* moment of our existence. As God is realizing his decree he is actively gathering his church. The gathering of his people at any specific point of time must always be seen as a present, incomplete reality. God's side of this work is marked by the perfect progressive tense.²⁸ His work is perfect and complete from his side as he draws his elect to himself, but it is progressive in the sense that it needs to be finished and remains incomplete on a historical time line. Drawing on the terminology used in the *Leidener Synopsis*, Schilder spoke of the church *in facto* and *in fieri*.²⁹

²⁷On Schilder's view, see G.C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, (translated by John Vriend, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 20ff. The more actualistic approach is still defended by Christian Link; cf. C. Link, "The *Notae Ecclesiae*: A Reformed Perspective" in D. Willis and M. Welker, (eds.) *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology. Tasks, Topics, Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 239-261, cf. especially 253, 259

²⁸K. Schilder, "Over 'zijn' of 'worden' der kerk" *Verzamelde Werken* II (Goes: Oosterbaan en Le Cointre, 1954) 409; on the 'present progressive tense' (Dutch: "onvoltooid tegenwoordigen tijd") see idem, 415

²⁹See H. Bavinck (ed) *Synopsis Purioris theologiae...* (editio sexta, Leiden: Didericum Donner, 1881) Disputatio XL. xxxiv: "Haec Ecclesia visibili non est proprie alia Ecclesia ab invisibili, sed alio tantum modo consideratur, illa in fieri, hac in facto esse, quemadmodum domus quae aedificatur et aedificata est. Nam in visibili Ecclesia illa invisibilis, antea nobis descripta, colligitur et formatur; invisibilis in illa visibili haeret ac continetur." See J. Faber, *Essays in Reformed Doctrine*, 98-99

The former term highlights its completed and existing state, the latter term points to the unrealized aspects of the church, indicating that in this dispensation it remains in a state of becoming, an entity that is in the process of being completed, and brought to spiritual fullness.

The implication of this perspective is that the Reformed confession concerning the marks of the church was never meant to be applied in a static way but it is meant to underscore a *dynamic* reality. One must not simply ask what God has finished or completed up to a specific moment, but what God is doing in the present, whom he is gathering, where he gathers and in what way. Next to the dimension of apostolicity and sanctity that always closes the door to apostasy and error, there must be a dimension of openness to communions that are moving in a more confessional direction, and seeking to live in accordance with a more biblical and confessionally responsible ecclesiastical order. The discernment demanded by the Reformed confession thus constitutes an ongoing process of the application of abiding scriptural norms.³⁰ The norms are the same but they are to be applied in ever new and ever changing circumstances, in the context of a historical continuum in which new circumstances always emerge out of existing patterns and need to be weighed in that light, (cf. Phil 3:16).³¹

³⁰Hence the well known adage: "Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est."

³¹Due attention to the working of the word *within* the historical continuum is overlooked by L. Vischer, with the result that his approach remains entangled in the actualistic categories of neo-orthodoxy, cf. Lukas Vischer, "The Church-Mother of the Believers" in D.

One must understand the “will to ecumenism” of which Schilder repeatedly spoke from this perspective.³² Taking the will to ecumenism as a primary mark of the church was not meant by Schilder to depreciate the concern for faithfulness to God’s revealed norms, fidelity to the apostolic basis of the church or the standards of the truth and justice of God. He only meant to point out that in accordance with the standard of truth to which the church adheres, it will consistently and constantly defend and promote a call to unity in accordance with the prayer of the Lord and Head of the church who prayed to his Father “that they may all be one,” Jn 17:21.

In this perspective, which allows the true church to appear and function more as a *given* reality within the historical continuum rather than a promissory norm which true believers by their faith response can only approximate, reformation is primarily to be thought of as *return*. The pattern of reformation is a conscious decision to go back to the faith “which was once for all delivered to the saints,” (Jude 3) and, in moving forward, to discover the revealed patterns in which this inheritance may be put into practice and fully developed in the context of the needs of this world.

1.9 An eschatological aspect

Willis and M. Welker, 262-282, especially 277-278

³² See on this the essay of J.M. Batteau, “Schilder on the Church” in J. Geertsema (ed.) *Always Obedient. Essays on the Teaching of Dr. K. Schilder* (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995) 65-100; on the “will to ecumenism” cf. 91

The dynamic component in the view of the church, which draws on the notion of the church as assembly or gathering, includes an eschatological aspect as well, and this aspect has implications for the view on the church’s unity. In describing his mission to the Gentile nations, Paul indicates that the division between Israel and the nations has fallen away, and those who at one time were strangers to the covenants have now been brought near to God. Referring to the effect of the work on the cross for the Gentiles, Paul says of Christ that “he is our peace who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility....that he might create in himself one new man in the place of two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross...” Eph 2:14f. Drawing on Rom 9-11, one may take the creation of the “one new man” as a process which only culminates at the completion of Christ’s work of gathering his church. In this section dealing with the relationship between Israel and the nations, Paul makes clear that throughout the course of the mission to the Gentiles, God continues to work out his salvation purpose for people stemming from the Jews. He says that other Jews, “if they do not persist in their unbelief will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again,” Rom 11:23. Salvation has come to the Gentiles in order to make the Jews jealous, and through that jealousy, kindled by God himself, he employs his power to graft them into his church again.

From Paul’s summary of his own mission, we may conclude that the entire gathering of the church also represents a divine creation or a divine impulse

through which a new humankind comes to formation, one which in its integral unity also represents the breaking down of the old barriers between Israel and the nations, and implies the full integration and amalgamation of people from all nations into the family of Israel, the spiritual family of God.³³ Therefore, ultimately the full unity of the elect is realized only through the ongoing mission of the church, which must remain active to the *parousia*.

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³³ This is the mark of the new dispensation which Peter discovered through God’s special pedagogical dealings with him. After his meeting with Cornelius he says, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality...” Acts 10:34. This is the *missio Dei* by which *one new man* is being formed, composed of people from every tribe, tongue and nation.



IS MY COVENANT CHILD READY FOR COMMUNICANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?

by
David Barker

Introduction

How crucial it is for every person to be “born again” (John. 3:3) and to identify himself with the family of God. How glorious it is to hear someone profess his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and to consciously take his place among the community of those who name the name of Christ! As a believing parent, you are undoubtedly eager and prayerful that this be particularly true of your own children as you watch them grow.

The elders of the church look forward to that too. The Lord Jesus Christ charges them to shepherd his sheep and to maintain the church’s unity and purity. As part of that responsibility, it’s their duty to examine each prospective member regarding his or her profession of faith. They look to admit into communicant membership those who truly understand the gospel, who grasp the depth of their own sinful and helpless condition, who recognize and personally embrace Jesus Christ as their own Savior, and who seek actively to serve him as their Lord in the fellowship of his church.

It is toward that end that parents strive, teach, and pray for and with their children—always with the goal that one day they might come to confess the name of Christ and be confirmed in full membership in the church.

Does this mean my child will be “joining the church”?

If you are a believing parent who, with your children’ has been baptized into the church, the answer is an emphatic “No.”

You see, the relationship that God has established with his people is generational—God’s promise is to us and to our children. This Old Testament teaching—“*I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you*” (Gen. 17:7)—was reiterated and emphasized in the very first sermon preached in the New Testament Church: “*the promise is for you and your children*” (Acts 2:39).

This means that our God loves us both as individuals and as families. When you parents became believers, your children—present and future—came with you under the covenant and were received by baptism into the visible church. Isn’t it a great comfort to know that God brings our children under the umbrella of his covenant and that they already belong to him in a special way? As long as they remain under your parental care and oversight, they have a place with God not enjoyed by the child of an unbeliever.

This principle, however, does not automatically guarantee your child’s eventual regeneration and salvation. Christian parents—and the church family as a whole—have an urgent, necessary duty

to teach, train, pray for, and call each covenant child first to a saving faith in his Lord Jesus, and then to a public profession of that faith. “*If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved*” (Rom. 10:9-10).

When that day comes, therefore, our covenant children are not “joining the church” as if they have been only outsiders all along. When they stand before the congregation and take their vows, they confirm the covenant under which God has placed them. On the day of their public profession, they formally embrace and claim it for themselves and for their own future generations.

From birth your child has been under God’s covenant. But he is responsible for how he responds to that covenant as he matures. Throughout his life—as he grows into adulthood—he will prove to be either a covenant-keeper affirming God’s promises by confessing and serving Christ, or else he will prove to be a covenant-breaker casting off and rejecting the gift of God and suffering the everlasting covenant-breaker history of the Bible which gives examples both of covenant keepers and of covenant breakers. Consider Isaac’s sons, Jacob and Esau. Consider Aaron’s four sons. Remember David’s sons, Absalom

and Solomon. Each of these were circumcised covenant children.

This is why you need to teach and nurture your little ones, praying that God will bring them early to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior. Then when we see the evidences of faith in them, we desire to see our growing children profess that faith publicly in the church and take their place as full communicant members.

A parent should recognize what it means for a covenant child to publicly profess his faith in Christ to become a communicant member of the church. It means that he says in effect, "I used to follow Jesus because my parents do. But now I commit to follow Jesus because it is my own heart-conviction." Becoming a communicant member of the church outwardly demonstrates several things:

- (a) a person's own eagerness to commune with God through his means of grace (the Word, the sacraments, and prayer);
- (b) a person's own commitment to serve Christ's kingdom and bear witness to the gospel;
- (c) a person's own willingness to obey God's Word and make sacrifices for God's glory.

Is my child ready?

When are our children ready? Is there a proper age? There can be some difficulty in knowing with a measure of confidence when it is time. The expressions of faith from their lips, the signs of faith in their conduct—these things occur at different ages in different children. And there can be quite a bit of disparity in the pace of this

growing process to maturity from child to child.

Of course, we may rule out infants and toddlers and most (though not all) of those below the average age normally identified with maturity. Still, we judge that Scripture does not prescribe a particular age as a general rule. What is clear from Scripture is that parents must work together with the elders to ascertain the readiness of each child for this important step. To determine whether your child is ready, consider these questions:

First, has my child been baptized?

We believe the Bible teaches that the children of believers are to receive the covenant sign of baptism—either shortly after birth or when their parents are received into the visible church. We don't believe this because of man-made tradition or groundless superstition. We believe this is the clear instruction of God himself in his Word. God's Word—when we study it as a whole from Genesis to Revelation—teaches one God, one people, one baptism, and one salvation through one Savior according to one covenant promise (Eph. 4:4-6).

Throughout the unfolding of redemptive history, God has always provided an identifying mark to be given to his people as a sign of his covenant with them. Before Christ's coming, that sign was circumcision:

"This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you

who is eight days old must be circumcised....My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Gen. 17:10-14).

But with the coming of Christ, the covenant sign was changed from circumcision to baptism with water (Matt. 28:19). Colossians 2:11-12 shows that baptism now means what circumcision once meant, "*In [Christ] you were also circumcised in the putting off of the sinful nature—not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ—when you were buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.*" The meaning and purpose of the New Testament sign of water baptism is rooted in the meaning and purpose of the covenant sign in the Old Testament.

Further, the Bible teaches that this covenant sign is to be given not just to adult converts, but also to children born to believing parents. The reason is because those children are already claimed by Christ. We baptize our children because Scripture says they are holy (1 Cor. 7:14), that is, God has set them apart under his covenant—he has set them apart to be raised in Christian homes, which indeed is a great privilege. God calls believing parents to realize what an awesome obligation it is to raise a child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In baptizing their children, believing parents vow to God that they will teach their children from his Word, live the life of faith in the home, and trust Christ to work in

the hearts of their children by his Holy Spirit.

Sincere Christians disagree on the subject of infant baptism. However, it is clear from Scripture that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant. And there is not the slightest hint or suggestion in either the Old Testament or the New Testament that the sign of God's covenant is to be withheld from the children of believers. Quite to the contrary, in the very first sermon of the early church, Peter said God's promise is to "you and your children" (Acts 2:39; cf. Ps. 103:17-18). Moreover, we read of entire households being baptized at one time (Acts 16:11-15, 25-34; 1 Cor. 1:16). Given the covenant pattern in the Bible, this is exactly what we would expect to see. This is the correct biblical practice for the church today.

Second, does my child know the basics of the Christian faith?

What is expected of one coming to communicant membership is more than religious-sounding words. Certainly a profession of one's faith is required, but it must be made credibly (believably)—with knowledge and understanding. The child must be able to explain what he means in his own words, explain why he believes and why he desires to enter into this new level of relationship to the visible Church.

The first place the gospel is to be seen and heard is in your child's home. God gives parents the primary responsibility for their children's Christian nurture. Knowing how important this is and yet also knowing how easily it is neglected, the Session strongly urges every Christian father to take the initiative and responsibil-

ity to lead his family in regular, daily family worship and prayer, and to guard the Lord's Day from being infringed upon by outside and worldly influences and activities so that it remains consecrated to God for public worship, family time, rest, and Christian training and service.

The second place your child should learn of the gospel is from participation in the public worship services and the educational program of this Church.

We do not offer "Children's Church" during the public worship service. That is for a very important reason—your children, from the time they are old enough to begin schooling, should be with their families whenever our Lord Jesus Christ himself comes supernaturally to bless his people by his Spirit through his Word as it is publicly read and preached. For every growing child, this takes some time to adjust to and begin to benefit from. Parents should not be dismayed by the energy and discipline it takes to get children used to it. It's worth it! By the time your child is old enough to consider communicant membership, he should be eagerly listening and growing from the worship and preaching week after week.

Also, we offer classes for our children which systematically present and unfold all the basic truths of the Christian faith. We take very seriously our responsibility to feed the lambs—to teach the gospel clearly to children of all ages. Besides the curriculum provided for the children, the Session also takes our adult education classes seriously. If you and your family are not enrolled and involved in these classes, we encourage you to take this important step.

Along with our regular educational program, the pastor offers a special class for the specific purpose of preparing covenant children for communicant membership. In this Communicant Class, we study and survey all the basics of the Christian faith. This class is open to any of our covenant children but there is a level of interest and maturity expected of the students. Once the class is over, there is no obligation on the part of your child to take the step of communicant membership. However, anyone who wishes to take that step must take the Communicant Class.

Third, does my child demonstrate a love and devotion to Christ?

Sufficient knowledge of the gospel is important. But it is hardly all that defines the disciple of Christ. The fruit of the Christian life is a love and personal devotion to the Lord. Its evidence is the same for a child as for an adult. Although there will be obvious differences due to age and maturity, certain signs must be apparent if the Session is to confirm the verbal testimony.

Your child must demonstrate:

- (a) that he understands the deceitfulness and dangers of sin,
- (b) that he has a personal walk with Jesus as his Lord and Savior through his own prayer life,
- (c) that he demonstrates a willingness to recognize sin, confess and repent of it, and strive toward obedience, and
- (d) that, in terms of conduct, he is able to manage and demon-

strate a level of self-control and self-discipline.

This demonstrates his readiness to move out from under the umbrella of his parents' relationship to God and to stand before God as a believer in his own right.

This does not mean that a young child can not already be a genuine believer in Jesus Christ. Parents should make it a healthy practice at home to repeatedly call their growing children to think on spiritual things, to pray their confessions and expressions of faith in Christ, to act upon the knowledge and spiritual guidance that is proper for their age. In doing so, the child's spiritual maturity and understanding will grow right along with their physical development.

But to become a communicant member, the child must be able to articulate his faith and demonstrate it to the satisfaction not only of the parents but also of the elders of the church. When the parents are confident of their child's spiritual development, it then becomes the duty and responsibility of the elders to make that judgment. Even though they are finite and fallible men, the Lord has given them authority. Parents must respect their responsibility to make a judgment of the child's faith and his readiness to take his place in the church and to take on the responsibilities of communicant membership.

May my child take communion before becoming a communicant member?

As you may have guessed, this is the issue that has led to the designation "communicant member."

A communicant member is one who may and should partake of the sacrament of communion—the Lord's Supper.

The Scriptural guidelines for communion lines up with those of communicant membership: "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:28). This means that he must:

- (a) know what communion is basically about,
- (b) know how to examine his own heart, and
- (c) know what it means to desire the grace of God that is received by true believers through this sacrament.

Therefore the same principles that apply for communicant membership apply to one's eligibility for partaking in communion. If you as a parent are satisfied that your child demonstrates a visible understanding and grasp of the gospel and that he professes it as his own "good news," let us encourage you to proceed through the steps outlined above toward the goal of seeing your child confirmed by the Session as a communicant member.

But parents should not imagine that the Lord has authorized them to determine this eligibility on their own. The Lord Jesus Christ has clearly appointed and ordained the elders of the church to be the spiritual overseers of the flock. In obedience to the Lord, you should look to the elders for their confirmation of your own conclusions before allowing your child to partake of communion.

This principle also relates to the issue of your child's readiness to take on a responsible ministry within the church or to apply for positions such as "counselor" at a Christian summer camp or to be involved with any short-term mission work. It is not right or healthy for unbelievers to fill those kinds of positions merely because parents want to "keep them busy" or "give them the right impetus or influence." First things first. Let them profess that they believe and desire to honor Christ in all parts of their lives, that they submit to the teaching of God's Word and to their God-given authorities, and then let them go and represent Christ to others.

What will meeting with the Session be like?

When your child is ready to appear before the Session

- (a) the elders will take note of the record of his baptism, the maturity of his speech and conduct as they have observed it, the faithfulness of the parents, and his regularity of attendance in Sunday School and the Communicant Class;
- (b) they will ask him to profess his faith—to tell of his relationship with Christ and his dependence upon the grace of God for salvation and for signs of its application in his life. Don't get nervous, it won't be an exhaustive doctrinal examination, just an opportunity to witness to the elders how and why he loves his Lord!
- (c) When the elders are satisfied, they will set a date upon which they will call the child forward during a morning worship service, introduce

him to the congregation as one ready to make a profession of faith, and ask him to make the following vows. (One purpose of the Communicant Class is to discuss these vows and to explain them to each prospective member's understanding and satisfaction.)

1. Do you **believe** the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?
2. Do you **confess** that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?
- 3 Do you **acknowledge** Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord and do you promise, in reliance on the grace of God, to serve him with all that is in you, to forsake the world, to mortify your old nature, and to lead a godly life?
4. Do you **agree** to submit in the Lord to the government of this church and, in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life, to heed its discipline?

What if—after there has been an interview—the Session asks us to wait?

This is not unheard of. Nor is it a sign of any shame whatsoever to be told by the Session before or after an interview with your child, that they deem it best that he wait a bit longer in order to grow more in his understanding of the gospel and in his own experience with the Lord before he takes the step of publicly professing his faith and partaking of the Lord's Supper.

There might be several reasons for this. God's grave warnings in 1 Corinthians 11:27-31 are definitely to be heeded. This is not merely some kind of graduation ceremony. For anyone—child or adult! To merely pretend to be a Christian for any reason can reap serious consequences. In the meantime, there is no harm done in waiting. As a parent, you should not take such a request by the Session as a personal rejection of you or of your child. It is only a possible wiser course to follow for the sake of your child's spiritual well-being. As a parent who knows his child best and watches him daily, you may remain absolutely convinced of his readiness. If such is indeed the case, God will reward your patience. But please do not overlook or dismiss

the fact that the elders, who must account to the living God himself for these things, must be able to assent to what they see and hear with a clear conscience. Our Lord has given them this duty for the good of the Lord's sheep and his church. When you think about it, you wouldn't really want it to be any different, would you? You take your responsibility as a parent seriously. You wouldn't want the elders of your Session to take theirs lightly!

What about all my other questions?

The pastor and the elders of the church stand ready at any time to discuss matters related to you and to your child personally. We don't want to treat any of God's children in a "cookie cutter" fashion. Each of them is special to the Lord. And that means that each of them is special to us too!

If you would like more information, the pastor or the elders would be happy to give you specific guidance on any of the topics and subjects that are addressed in this article.

Rev. David Barker is currently serving as pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church of America in Baltimore, Maryland. When he wrote this article he was pastor of Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Amsterdam, New York. We thank him for permission to use this article (with slight modification). It is our hope that sufficient funds may in the future enable our Committee on Christian Education to publish what you have read above, in booklet form.



HELPING COVENANT CHILDREN MAKE PROFESSION OF FAITH

By

J. Peter Vosteen

There is little recorded of Jesus' childhood in the Gospels. We have, of course, his birth described in both Matthew and Luke, followed by the journey to Egypt and Jesus' return to Nazareth. But then the record ends until his baptism by John at the Jordan River, the beginning of Jesus' ministry. However, there is one notable exception to this, found in the gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 41-52.

Jesus' parents were god-fearing people. They were faithful in obeying the Lord and in raising their children. It was their custom to travel up to the temple in Jerusalem every year for the Passover celebration.

The Law required that all males go three times a year for the feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles (Exodus 23:14-17). However, attendance at all three festivals was difficult because Jews were scattered all over the Roman world. Therefore, it was customary for those who lived a good distance from Jerusalem to go only once.

So it was that Joseph chose to take his family to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. They taught their children the heart of the gospel in these yearly pilgrimages as they remembered the Lord's deliverance of his people from slavery to sin to full redemption in the promised land.

Today, if we want our children to responsibly profess their faith before the church, we must begin teaching them the gospel at an early age. This involves taking them to church regularly to hear God's word preached. And it means instruction at home. They must hear God's

truth from our mouths and observe its practice in our lives.

On this trip to Jerusalem, when he was 12 years old, Jesus stayed behind while the rest of the family left for home. Jesus' parents didn't miss him until they were a day's journey outside the city. This was fairly easy to do because the relatives traveled in a group. The parents thought he was with his cousins elsewhere, so they were not worried about him. However, when they looked for him, he was nowhere to be seen. So they hurried back to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days, they found him in the temple courts sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. **"Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers"** (v. 47).

Again, we see an important part of home training. His parents had instructed him in the Scriptures and he was a precocious child. He was advanced in his understanding of the Scriptures. Not every child will be like Jesus in this. After all, he was the eternal Son of God become man, and our children often show more of their relationship to Adam than to Christ. However, that is no excuse for us. We must be diligent in training our children in the Scriptures.

The Holy Spirit uses the Bible to change hearts. We can modify their behavior through our training, but we can't change their hearts. Only God can. And he uses the Bible. If children are not taught the Bible, an important link is removed in the process of bringing them to profess Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

When Joseph and Mary finally found Jesus, Mary was a bit upset with him, as you might expect a mother to be. They were worried about him, afraid that they lost him. Jesus' response to this anxious search was a bit unexpected by us who deal with 12-year-olds on a regular basis. We would have apologized for his thoughtless actions. After all, 12-year-olds often get caught up in what they are doing and forget to carry out their responsibilities to their parents. But no, Jesus does not apologize. Rather, he answers, **"Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"** (v. 49).

Mary and Joseph did not understand what he was talking about. Why should he stay in the Temple? Why should he sit among the teachers of the law asking them questions? Shouldn't he have been traveling home with his parents? Why did he have to be in his Father's house?

What his parents could not understand, we, from our vantage point, can look back and understand. When a Jewish boy reached 13 years old, he could become a "son of the law". To do this, he had his bar mitzvah and he became a full member of the synagogue with all its privileges and responsibilities. This signified he had reached adulthood and he was approaching the time when he could marry and establish his own home. Consequently, since Jesus had to keep the law, not only for himself, but also for all of us, he was especially concerned to know that law perfectly. He studied diligently. He questioned the teachers carefully

when he was still 12 years old, so that when he took on adult responsibilities, he would obey the law perfectly. Jesus showed his Messianic consciousness at this young age when he said he had to be in his Father's house. He showed that he realized his responsibility in becoming a "son of the law". Of course, he could not go home to Nazareth so soon after the feast. He needed to be in the temple preparing for his ministry, which included the perfect keeping of the law. From this example, we learn two important truths. First, it is the responsibility of our church elders, like the teachers in the temple, to carefully instruct our young people in biblical doctrine, building on what their parents have taught. To accomplish this, each teacher should be an elder who has a good relationship with the young people, knows his doctrine well, and is able to communicate it clearly. This teaching is best accomplished through catechism classes. It is important that the youth of the church learn catechism. It is something that will stick with them the rest of their lives. However, it must not be bare catechism. The student must understand that the catechism teaches the doctrine of the Bible. Always the catechism must be taught as based on the Bible. Otherwise, these secondary standards could become the basis of their faith instead of the Word of God.

Along with catechism, classes for young people should include lessons on Christian living. Too often, church members know their doctrine, but do not put it into practice. Ultimately, this situation leads to dead congregations that have the form of godliness, but lack its power. Therefore, it is important to challenge young people to live what they believe from an early age.

Perhaps the objection arises that your elders are already over-

worked, or that they do not have the skill to communicate doctrinal knowledge to young people, or that they do not have the necessary rapport with young people. It has been my experience that rather than force an elder to do this job simply because he is an elder, it is better to enlist another man, who is respected by the young people and who is able and willing, to work under the direction of the elders. It will pay great dividends in the long run.

Before it is time for young people to appear before the session to profess their faith, the minister or an elder should meet with each individual. (Don't do this in a group.) On this occasion, the elder should make the young person feel comfortable. Ask questions about their life that are not intimidating or too personal, but show an interest in what they are doing. Listen carefully to what they are saying. When they are relaxed, inquire about their faith. Inform them of what will transpire when they appear before the session. Ask them if they feel ready to come. Offer them more instruction or help if they are uncomfortable or would like it. Go over the questions the session will ask them. Make sure that the time before the elders will be a positive experience in which they can articulate their faith clearly. Remember, this should be a highlight of their life that they can always remember with joy.

Secondly, from the story of Jesus before the teachers in the temple we gain guidance concerning the age when profession of faith should be made. Jesus studied diligently so that when he joined the synagogue, he could take his place among the others responsibly and with maturity. He was emerging from adolescence and was about to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. In Jesus' society this was around age 13 while in our society it is more like age 18.

Before our young people make profession of faith, they should have a heartfelt commitment to Jesus Christ and have studied well. They likewise should have come to an age where they show maturity and responsibility.

But why not encourage young children to make profession of faith? They often believe in Jesus and want to take communion. It is true that young children can have a strong commitment to Jesus Christ. Many times those who come before the session will say they cannot remember a specific date when they began to believe in the Lord. As far as they can remember, they have always believed. It is also true that some children have a deep conviction that they want to express their faith before the congregation. They show great maturity beyond their years.

In exceptional cases such a desire should not be denied. However, in most cases, the Scriptural pattern should be followed. Young children reflect the views and teaching of their parents. There is a period of maturation when a child becomes adult by self-consciously analyzing what he believes and why he believes it. It is important that the child progress through this process prior to profession of faith. We, as elders, can help young people and the church by assisting our youth through this difficult time of their life to a real and vital profession of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, or God.

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BRINGING OUR BAPTIZED CHILDREN TO COMMUNICANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

by

John R. Hilbelink

One of the great joys in a local church's life is the time when our baptized children stand before the congregation and make their public profession of faith. We hear them affirm the four questions from our Directory For Public Worship:

1. Do you **believe** the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?
2. Do you **confess** that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?
3. Do you **acknowledge** Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord and do you promise in reliance on the grace of God, to serve him with all that is in you, to forsake the world, to mortify (put to death) your old nature, and to lead a godly life?
4. Do you **agree** to submit in the Lord to the government of this church and, in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life, to heed its discipline?"

The minister then responds in these or similar words,

"Beloved, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I welcome you to all the privileges of full communion with God's people, and in particular to participation in the sacrament of the holy supper." (DPW V.5.)

Some incorrectly call this event "joining church". The fact is that our children have been included in the membership of the church

since their baptism. Entrance to the visible church is by baptism, and this baptism signifies and seals to us and our children that it is only by the sovereign and gracious working of the Triune God in his covenant that we are made to be his children and citizens of his kingdom. And now, having been marked as children of the covenant, belonging to Christ by baptism, our children come before the church to profess Christ alone, the Mediator of the covenant, as their Savior and Lord. And doing so, they have the right "to all the privileges of full communion with God's people, and in particular to participation in the sacrament of the holy supper."

Robert Letham, in his fine book on the Lord's Supper, describes the sacrament as "a microcosm of the gospel." He further states, "One's position on the Supper is an accurate index of one's understanding of the Christian faith as a whole" (*The Lord's Supper*, P&R: Phillipsburg, NJ, 2001, p. 23). We will limit our consideration of communicant membership to this "microcosm of the gospel"—the privilege of participation in the Lord's Supper. First, we will consider what is required of our children for participating and, second, what we must do to encourage our children to seek communicant membership.

What is required of our baptized children for participating in the Lord's Supper?

The 55th General Assembly of the OPC provided an answer

to this question in its Tuesday, May 24, 1988 session. The assembly adopted the following statement concerning the requirements for participation in the Lord's Supper:

"1. That the Assembly advise ... the sessions of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that the requirements of the Scriptures and our subordinate standards for meaningful participation in the Lord's Supper is not age, but a faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking." (Minutes of the 55th GA, p. 60.)

How old must our children be? While the matter of age was of primary interest in arriving at the action of the 55th GA, notice that no age is specified. Rather, the child or young adult is required to demonstrate "a faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking." In unusual circumstances the age for profession of faith may be younger than the ages between 12 and 18 that many of our churches might anticipate. But, the basic requirement for receiving the Lord's Supper is that participants partake with a "faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking."

1 Corinthians 11:28-29 requires that those who receive the Lord's Supper be able to examine themselves and to discern the Lord's body:

“But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.”

But what does it mean for a person to examine himself and discern the Lord’s body? In our form for the administration of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, the minister says the following or similar words after reading the warning for the Lord’s Supper:

“Nevertheless, this warning is not designed to keep the humble and contrite from the table of the Lord, as if the supper were for those who might be free from sin. On the contrary, we who are invited to the supper, *coming as guilty and polluted sinners and without hope of eternal life apart from the grace of God in Christ, confess our dependence for pardon and cleansing upon the perfect sacrifice of Christ, base our hope of eternal life upon his perfect obedience and righteousness, and humbly resolve to deny ourselves, crucify our old natures, and follow Christ as becomes those who bear his name.* Let us therefore, in accordance with the admonition of the apostle Paul, examine our minds and hearts to determine whether such *discernment* is ours, to the end that we may partake to the glory of God and to our growth in the grace of Christ.” (DPW V.5.)

The words in italics are emphasized for the point made here. They describe the areas for a proper examination of our hearts. And, the examination called for is directly related to “discerning the Lord’s body”. Our children must be able to examine themselves in their relationship to Christ in his death, and to discern the

elements as they partake as signifying and sealing to them the blessings of the covenant in Christ’s death.

Now consider the second question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism: “How many things are necessary for you to know, that you in this comfort [“your only comfort in life and in death”—Q/A 1] may live and die happily?” What things are necessary for us to know?

“Three; (1) how great my sins and misery are; (2) how I am delivered from all my sins and misery; (3) how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.” Or, to put it even more briefly, our children must be able to examine themselves with regard to their **Guilt, Grace, Gratitude**, or another alliterative trio, **Sin, Salvation, Service**.

Notice how these three areas of instruction in the Heidelberg Catechism can be related to the call to members to a discerning examination of themselves in our form for the Lord’s Supper:

Guilt/Sin:

“the first, how great my sins and misery are;” (HC)
“coming as guilty and polluted sinners and without hope of eternal life apart from the grace of God in Christ,” (DPW)

Grace/Salvation:

“the second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery;” (HC)
“confess our dependence for pardon and cleansing upon the perfect sacrifice of Christ, base our hope of eternal life upon his perfect obedience and righteousness,” (DPW)

Gratitude/Service:

“the third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.” (HC)
“and humbly resolve to deny ourselves, crucify our old natures, and follow Christ as becomes those who bear his name.” (DPW)

Do our baptized children demonstrate such a faith? Can our baptized children answer the four questions for profession of faith in the OPC with a discerning “Yes”? Do they confess their sinfulness and trust for salvation in the crucified and risen Christ alone? Are they able to “discern” or recognize the “Lord’s body” given in death as the only sacrifice for their sin? Do they partake “in remembrance of” Christ who laid down his life for them? Do they in their partaking proclaim Christ’s death as their only comfort and strength for every aspect of their daily walk? Does their participation in the Lord’s Supper – “a microcosm of the gospel” – proclaim a faith and life in the power of the gospel?

What must we do to encourage our children to seek communicant membership?

The 55th General Assembly also adopted the following in the same motion quoted above:

“2. That the Assembly encourage the sessions to be more faithful in oversight of the flock of Jesus Christ, particularly the covenant children who are in truth members of the church.” (Minutes of the 55th GA, p. 60.)

Given our heritage we know that it is by the grace of God that our children come to communicant membership. Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44) and “I am the vine you are the branches. If a man

remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit: apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The Scriptures clearly teach, and the sacraments bear testimony, that everything we as parents and the church do to bring our children to communicant membership is by God’s grace in Christ.

Walking by faith in Christ we obey the direction of God’s Word in training our covenant children:

“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up . . .” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7ff).

“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

“Feed my lambs” (John 21:15).

“Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2).

What then must we do to encourage our baptized children to seek communicant membership? Certainly worship services, family devotions, Catechism classes, Sunday School lessons, youth groups, and Inquirers’ Classes have a part in this answer. But, we must be careful that the method we use is the message we proclaim. The power of salvation is the gospel of Christ, not some self-anointed method. We prayerfully seek a true and living faith in our children giving evidence of the saving power of God, not an empty form of godliness (2 Timothy 3:5). That power is the gos-

pel with Jesus Christ at its center—a gospel that we must minister without shame.

We are called to honor our Lord by prayerfully ministering the means of grace our Lord has given us the Word of God, the Sacraments, and prayer. While it may be tempting to imitate those who use other measures to bring people to communicant membership, we need to remember that we are not called to be the Messiah. We are called to be faithful servants of Christ as parents, pastors and ruling elders.

The 19th century theologian, John W. Nevin wrote *“The Anxious Bench”*, a critique of new measures used by Charles Finney, who called the Westminster Standards “a paper pope”. In his book Nevin said,

“... it calls for comparatively little power, for a man to distinguish himself as lender in periodical religious excitements, where zeal has room for outward display, and wholesale action is employed to discharge within a month the claims of a year.” (J.W. Nevin, “The Anxious Bench”, *The Weekly Messenger*: Chambersburg, PA, 1843, p. 24)

Nevin’s concern was to defend “the Catechism” as a Biblical system of teaching against the detractors’ accusation that the Catechism is a “dead form”. He wrote, “The spirit of the Anxious Bench is at war with the spirit of the Catechism... It is the living Catechism, the Catechism awakened and active, that is intended in this opposition” (p. 56).

Long before Sunday School became an institution in our churches, the Catechism was the primary method next to the reading and preaching of the Word for the instruction of

covenant youth. For the OPC, the Westminster Shorter Catechism is one of the most valuable tools we have in our churches for instructing the precious “heritage of the Lord”. Its use is emphasized in the vows taken by parents when their children are baptized, and for this reason, it should be given a major place in the teaching ministry of our churches. Further the Shorter Catechism is classic, comprehensive, concise, and Christ-centered.

It is classic. It has stood the test of time and its use continues edify the church and her families. Its contents present the historic Christian Faith. The catechisms of the Reformation—like the Heidelberg Catechism—included teaching on the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments. While not including the Apostles’ Creed word for word, every phrase of the Creed is treated at some point in the Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Standards.

It is comprehensive in scope. Where in the space of 107 brief questions and answers can one find such a wealth of sound teaching?

It is concise in language. The important doctrines of the faith are presented in a carefully chosen economy of words. For example Question and Answer 33, “What is justification? *Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.*”

It is Christ-centered. Brian J. Lee in the December 2000 issue of *Modern Reformation* calls “WWJD” (“What Would Jesus

Do?”) the “modern counterpart” to the “catechisms of the Reformation”, “providing no correct answer to its single, hypothetical question” (p. 33). The Shorter Catechism teaches what Jesus has done and continues to do for his children. Our baptized children need to know they are identified with Christ by their baptism. They need to know Jesus Christ and him crucified as their only hope of salvation, and that Jesus Christ is their refuge and strength as they walk in a world from whose way of life they are separated. They need to trust in him as their payment for sin, and power for salvation, and pattern for service.

Are you serious about encouraging your children to seek communicant membership? Give the Shorter Catechism a prominent place in your church’s ministry. Give parents the church’s encouragement to make memory of the Shorter Catechism together with related Scriptures a priority. Direct them to teaching resources such as *“Training Hearts, Teaching Minds”* by Starr Meade and *“The Shorter Catechism”* (2 Volumes) by G.I. Williamson, both published by Presbyterian and Reformed, and other works on the Shorter Catechism by John Favel, Thomas Vincent, Thomas Watson, and Alexander Whyte. Do you desire to incorporate a Scripture memory program with the Shorter Catechism? Consider Paul Settle’s fine memory program published by Great Commission Publications.

But, use of the Shorter Catechism has not been without some obstacles. Learning it may take considerable effort. And, lazy parents may have little difficulty in finding sympathetic ears to hear the excuses for not encouraging their children to

memorize it. B.B. Warfield said in a short article entitled “Is the Shorter Catechism Worthwhile?”,

“The Shorter Catechism is, perhaps, not very easy to learn. And very certainly it will not teach itself. Its framers were less careful to make it easy than to make it good. As one of them, Lazarus Seaman, explained, they sought to set down in it not the knowledge the child has, but the knowledge the child ought to have... Do we not think the acquisition of the grounds of religion worth some effort...?” (from the website of the Bible Presbyterian Church, <http://www.bpc.org> Westminster Shorter Catechism Project – a fine resource to help prepare lessons in the Shorter Catechism!)

Parents, what must you do to encourage your baptized children to seek communicant membership?

Remember the vows you took before the Lord and his church when your children were baptized:

*“Do you **acknowledgethat**, although our children are conceived and born in sin and therefore are subject to condemnation, they are holy in Christ, and as members of his church ought to be baptized?”*
*“Do you **promiseto** instruct your child in the principles of our holy religion as revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and as summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church; and do you promise to pray with and for your child, to set an example of piety and godliness before him, and to endeavor by all the means of God’s appointment to bring him up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?”* (DPW, IV,B.4).

Teach by word and example what it is to trust in Christ and to love Christ and his church, to

love God’s Word and hunger to learn more, instructing your children in the Word, using the Shorter Catechism, praying with and for your children, eagerly bringing your children with you to worship God, and prayerfully seeking God’s grace to keep the world from encroaching on their spiritual life. Parents, tell your children regularly, “Our greatest desire for you is to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and to love him with all your hearts, to know him as your Savior and Lord, and to live with him forever.”

And, by God’s grace, the time will come when you see God’s blessing on your faithful ministry to your children. You will rejoice when they stand before the church professing faith in the Christ, whom they have known from infancy because of parents and teachers faithful to their covenant responsibilities. And, they will know the blessings you know as you together partake of the Lord’s supper with a “faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ”. And, as you have prayed with and for them, perhaps since before they were born as some parents have done, continue to pray that God will use them to faithfully bring the gospel of Christ to the following generation.

John R. Hilbelink is pastor of Second Parish OPC in Portland, Maine. Our thanks to John for, once again, sharing some of the fruits of his many years of experience as a pastor and a teacher with the readers of *Ordained Servant*.

THE DECRE TAL PROBLEM OF HYPER-CALVINISM:

A RESPONSE TO “ARMINIANISM, CALVINISM AND HYPER-CALVINISM”

By Allen C, Tomlinson



In Pastor Brenton Ferry’s article “Arminianism, Calvinism and Hyper-Calvinism, page 59 of the July, 2001, issue of *Ordained Servant* (Vol. 10, Num. 3), it is affirmed, “The Calvinist...recognizes an important distinction between the decree and the desire of God, and lives with the tension that there are some things which God decrees but does not desire (like sin and damnation), and there are some things which God desires but does not decree (like universal repentance and salvation).” In this response I would like to respectfully disagree with my brother in this matter.

I affirm from the start that I am not a Hyper-Calvinist. I believe in preaching the Gospel to all people indiscriminately, and doing so with earnestness and from the heart. However, I do not believe that either the Bible or our Confession affirms a tension between God’s desire and God’s decree, but to the contrary, both affirm a correspondence between what God desires and what God has determined will certainly take place. The common problem with Arminianism and Hyper-Calvinism is a confusion between God’s decree and God’s precepts.

Those confusing God’s decree and God’s precepts operate

as if the church determines God’s decree based on God’s revealed precepts (Arminians) or as if the church determines God’s precepts based on what God has revealed about His decree (Hyper-Calvinists). Because God commands the church to preach the Gospel to every creature, the (evangelical) Arminian concludes (by a logically invalid argument) that God’s decree is universal but not completely effective. Because God has revealed that he has chosen to save only some, the Hyper-Calvinist concludes (by a logically invalid argument) that God only wants us to preach to the elect. Brother Ferry’s article correctly and helpfully reminds us that these two extremes ironically have some of the same misunderstandings. However, the biblical (and confessional) tension is not between *desire* and *decree* but between *decree* and *precepts*. God commands us to preach the Gospel to all, inviting all to come to Christ and be reconciled to God. God also tells us that no one will come except those whom He has chosen. The Confession warns us to handle the doctrine of the decree “with special prudence and care” (3.VIII.) We should apply the doctrine only in those ways the Bible itself indicates (assurance for the believer and glory to God) and not in any way that

contradicts other parts of God’s Word (i.e., contradicting the precept to preach the Gospel to all).

However, God *decrees* all that he *desires*. This is clearly affirmed in Scripture, and is recognized in our Confession. Psalm 115:3 “But our God is in heaven; he does *whatever he pleases*.” It is precisely because God desires it that it (whatever “it” is) is accomplished! Psalm 135:6, “*Whatever the LORD pleases he does*, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deep places.” If words having any signification at all, this affirms that God’s *decree* is the outworking of ALL that God *desires*. Especially in regard to election to everlasting life, it is “according to the purpose of *him who works all things according to the counsel of his will*” (Eph. 1:11). He has “predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to himself, according to *the good pleasure of his will*” (Eph. 1:5). *To make a distinction between what God wills in his good pleasure and what he delights in and desires, it seems to me, is to cause great and unnecessary confusion.*

There is a tension in our understanding. It is not between God’s desire and God’s decree, but between God’s decree and God’s precepts. It is a tension in

THE DECRETAL PROBLEM OF HYPER-CALVINISM

our understanding only, not in God himself, for God is One in his essence. He is “without parts” (WCF 2.1). Though he has revealed himself to us, using human language, by several qualities or attributes, in his essence his justice and mercy are not two different parts of God but two views of the One God from our finite perspective. God is “incomprehensible” but also simple (in the philosophical and theological sense of that word). God is working out his decrees, partly, by the church obeying his precepts. This is true even if the church cannot, in this world, always see how the two go together. Because of our finite perspective, we must always obey God’s precepts given to us in the Bible. We are not big

enough to understand and determine how to please God by merely looking at what He tells us about his essence or his decrees.

”Those of mankind that are predestined unto life, God before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and *good pleasure of his will*, hath chosen, in Christ, unto his everlasting glory, out of His mere free grace and love...” (WCF 3.V.). “The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy, as *he pleases*, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to

pass by. . .” (WCF 3.VII.). This is because, “God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel *of his own will*, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. . . (WCF 3.I.).

It is not God’s *decree* and God’s *desires* that are in tension—for our finite viewpoint—but rather God’s *decree* and God’s *precepts*. God is never frustrated. God’s decree and God’s desires are one, because he is God. God’s decree, as far as the salvation or damnation of men or angels is concerned, is according to his will by which “He extendeth or withholdeth favour *as he pleaseth*. . .” (LC 13).

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