



## Living with the Lord

1. Those who no longer acknowledge God as the Highest Authority must necessarily lose their 'feeling' of what is good and what is wrong. In today's world the consciousness of guilt is wearing out.

This may explain, for example, the increase in the crime rate. It may also explain the lack of integrity of many politicians who during election campaigns make all kinds of promises they have no intention of keeping.

Much more could be said about this aspect of today's horizontalism and secularisation.

However, it is not our intention to dwell on such examples, but simply to use them as a focus upon the topic of this article.

The phenomenon briefly ascribed above is given thorough treatment in a recently published book, written by six professors of theology. Three of these professors teach at the theological university of our sister churches at Kampen, and the other three occupy a similar position at the parallel institution of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken at Apeldoorn.<sup>1</sup>

2. Our particular attention was drawn to some remarks made by professor Dr. C. Trimp in this book on Question and Answer 115 of our Heidelberg Catechism, and, more generally, on the "three parts" of the knowledge of faith required in our life with the LORD.

Now at an earlier stage this question and answer had already gained my special interest, because there in the "three parts" of Answer 2 are repeated, whereas at the same time it is stated that they are supposed to play a role *"throughout our life"*, and that we are expected to let them do so *"more and more"*. They are supposed to occupy an important place in our communion with the LORD.

Contrary to the idea popular in certain circles that they are three successive periods in a believer's life, they must be known (which, in the language of the Catechism, means: acknowledged, confessed) simultaneously and contemplated throughout our life. We could describe this as a vicious circle: our awareness of the role which our sinful nature plays in our life must cause us to flee to Christ, and the assurance of the forgiveness which is in Him leads to a grateful submission to God's will as it has been revealed in God's Law, and therefore also to prayer. However, then the process starts all over again, for our gratitude is never perfect in this life, and our willingness to live in obedience to God's commandments is constantly followed by serious shortcomings, so that we must flee to Christ again. This process is constantly repeated in the life which we as Christians live before God's countenance and in the covenant communion with Him. It may appear to be a vicious circle, but it is rather more a spiral motion because it is God's intention that we grow and increase in faith – as is expressed in the *"more and more"* found not just once but twice in No.115. We are expected to reach higher levels, *"until after this life we reach the goal of perfection"*.

3. What struck me particularly, as soon as I read professor Trimp's contribution, were the following lines (in my translation):

*The sacrament of penance, which has come down to us from the Middle Ages, contained three parts: the confession of guilt, the absolution of sins, and the satisfaction by doing good works.*

*In my opinion we possess in the three parts of the Catechism a reformative alternative for the sacrament of penance, which sacrament used to function in one's preparation for the celebration of the communion with Christ.*

*The 'knowledge of our misery' replaces the confession of sin; the acquittal is primarily offered in the preaching (according to Lord's Day 25 and Lord's Day 31), and the 'satisfaction' as a motive for doing 'good works' has been replaced by 'gratitude'.<sup>2</sup>*

4. In his footnotes the author refers to an article written and published in the year 1982 by professor J.Kamphuis.<sup>3</sup>

I expected to find there the proof for professor Trimp's opinion, but his reference to this article appeared to have a different purpose.<sup>4</sup>

However, all of a sudden I remembered: not only the Heidelberg Catechism mentions the "three parts", but also the Form for holy Baptism and the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper, and these documents originate from the Palatinate, having been incorporated in the Church Order of that electorate. (This is why it is sometimes called 'a liturgical church order', unlike our own Church Order, which only refers to the Catechism and the liturgical forms but does not include their text). I wondered whether there would be something in this Church Order that gives us an indication that the 'three parts' of sin, grace, and gratitude were indeed the "reformative alternative" of the three parts of the auricular confession, the sacrament of penance.

Taking from the shelves a book containing the text of this Church Order<sup>5</sup>, I soon found out that there is indeed such a strong indication.

Apart from the Heidelberg Catechism the churches of the Palatinate had not only adopted a Form for the Lord's Supper, but also a Form for the Preparation for celebration of the Lord's Supper, and this document was also based on the well known 'three parts' of the Catechism.<sup>6</sup>

This preparation was held on the Saturday preceding the Sunday on which that sacrament was administered. Immediately following the sermon the public profession of faith made by young people was heard.<sup>7</sup> However, the communicant members of the congregation were also expected to repeat their public profession of faith, because the Form for the Preparation not only included an exposition of the 'three parts', but each of these sections ended with a question, to be answered by "I do".<sup>8</sup>

As may be obvious, this preparation for the celebration of the Lord's Supper was a kind of (repeated) "public profession of faith". It was indeed the "reformative alternative" of the Roman-Catholic auricular confession or the sacrament of penance!

5. However this is not the end of the story. For after the text of the preparation form the Church Order of the Palatinate contained two more regulations. The first was a recommendation that, whenever it may be necessary for the upbuilding of the congregation, the minister may teach the most important topics from the Catechism or its summary.<sup>9</sup>

The second regulation may also prove the truth of professor Trimp's thesis that the 'three parts' of our Catechism are the Reformation's alternative of the medieval auricular confession which acted as a preparation for one's participation in the Communion of the Mass. In a few lines it states that whenever someone would like to discuss a private matter with his minister, he should not be denied this. This sounds like a weak echo and remnant of the auricular confession.

6. It may be known that certain sections of our Heidelberg Catechism show the influence of Lutheranism, which was still evident when the Palatinate, under the guidance of Elector Frederick the Third, turned to Calvinism.

It is really surprising to read in Luther's Shorter Catechism of 1529, in answer to the question: what does the second part of the Apostles' Creed ("*I believe in Jesus Christ...*") mean?:

*"I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord; Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned man, secured and delivered me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death; in order that I might be His own, live under Him in His Kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, and lives and reigns forever. This is most certainly true".*

It may be clear: Zacharias Ursinus and the co-authors of our Catechism, though being staunch Calvinists, did not hesitate to 'borrow' from Luther's writings. And why did they do so? Because Luther had 'reformed' and replaced the medieval auricular confession, which took such an important place in the preparation for the communion in the Mass. For him one's participation in the Lord's Supper was an important event in the life with the Lord. It was part of the spiritual joy, which in our own Catechism is expressed in the careful formulation of its very second question:

*"What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?"*

The "three parts" are a beautiful and useful description of a Christian's life with his God in the communion of the covenant of grace!

7. For this reason it may be useful to learn more about what Luther has done with the medieval auricular confession.

I can assure our readers in advance that in his rejection of the specific Roman-Catholic doctrinal background of "the sacrament of penance" he strongly emphasised the importance of holy Baptism. This is of the utmost importance as regards the way in which the 'first part' of our Catechism (dealing with our sin and misery) is treated in the Catechism-preaching and at catechism-class: It must be done in the context and on the basis of the covenant of grace.

In this context we will be confronted with the world-famous Ninety-Five Theses of 31 October 1517, and other writings of Martin Luther.

At this stage, we can appreciate that the well known 'three parts' of our Catechism and the Forms for Baptism, Public Profession of Faith, and the Lord's Supper, are of the greatest importance for our life with the LORD. This communion with the LORD is supposed to be stimulated by the Catechism-preaching.

8. When our boys and girls leave school they are supposed to know that on the 31st of October 1517 Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Wittenberg castle chapel.

They may even know that these theses were a reaction to the sale of indulgences by the Dominican monk Johann Tetzel.

Not all of them, however, may be aware of the purpose and character of these theses: They were not meant to be read by the general public, but to be discussed in an academic dispute.

Only a few people know the text of the first thesis:

*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says: "Do penance etc.", He means that the believers' whole life must be a penitential exercise.*

In the second thesis he declared:

*It is impossible to state that this saying refers to the sacramental penance, the confession and satisfaction administered by the priestly office.*

Already at that time, in the year 1517, Martin Luther had some strong reservations regarding the medieval "sacrament of penance", which lay behind the sale of indulgences.

This means for us, who would like to learn more about the historical origin and meaning of the 'three parts' of the Heidelberg Catechism, mentioned in the forms for Baptism and the Lord's Supper also, that we need some information about that "sacrament of penance" or the auricular confession.

9. Making confession of sins has played a significant role from the very beginning of the Christian church.

One of the oldest documents, the *Didach* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, written at the end of the first century or in the first half of the second century, rules that one of the elements in church services must be the confession of sins: One should not go to God in prayer with a bad conscience. This was also applied to participating in the celebration of the Lord's Supper:

*"Having come together on the Lord's Day, you shall break bread and give thanks after first having confessed your sins, in order that your sacrifice be a pure one".<sup>10</sup>*

It was not only the Lord's Supper that played a role in this context, but also the sacrament of holy Baptism. In the ancient Christian church, in which adult baptism was still dominant, it was strongly emphasised: having been baptised means that one has entered into a new life. Consequently one, who had, in one way or another, fallen back into sin and came to repentance, must publicly confess his sin, for otherwise he could not go to God in either prayer or in the Lord's Supper.

This led to the development of a certain doctrine and practice of penance. Those who during the days of persecutions had compromised, for example by partaking of an idolatrous meal, could be forgiven only once, for if they were guilty of falling into the same or a similar sin again, they could never be re-admitted to the communion of the church.

Later on, when the Christian church had become the official church of the Roman Empire, this development led to the creation of a special rank of penitents. Their re-admittance to the church took place gradually: The first step was admission to the 'atrium', the place in front of the church doors, which was considered to be the borderline between the world and the church, whilst inside the church building the congregation was praying for them. The second step allowed them inside the door, where they could listen to the sermon but were not permitted to join in the prayers. Then, having been allowed inside, they must kneel down, whilst the congregation was praying for them. The fourth step permitted them to stand where they could watch the administration of the Lord's Supper but not participate. This whole procedure could take up to six years before they were re-accepted as full members!

10. Little by little this development concluded with the auricular confession or, more officially, the sacrament of penance.

This took place under the influence of some Irish-Scottish monks who, themselves having been influenced by the practice of the Eastern Church, replaced the public profession of sins with a confession before a special penance priest – later on such a confession could be made before any priest.

The theology of the 12th century developed this further into one of the seven sacraments, whereas the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 ruled that every believer had to make this confession before a priest at least once a year.<sup>11</sup>

11. For our purposes, a comparison of the 'three parts' of our Catechism and forms for Baptism and the Lord's Supper with the auricular confession, it is important to know that in this "sacrament of penance" three parts can be distinguished:

- 1) the heart's remorse (in Latin: *contritio cordis*);

- 2) the mouth's confession (*confessio oris*); and
- 3) the satisfaction imposed upon the penitent by the priest, some good works to be done (*satisfactio operum*).

After this follows the formal and official forgiveness of sins, the absolution.

It is with regard to these three sections of the auricular confession that we heard professor Trimp correctly state in the previous instalment that in the 'three parts' of our Catechism we possess a reformative alternative.

12. Why did Martin Luther protest so strongly against the practice of selling indulgences, and how was this related to the main theme of his Ninety-Five Theses: the 'sacrament of penance'?

The answer to this question is that the indulgences were the bad fruits of the development which led to the official adoption of the 'sacrament of penance'.

From the previous paragraph we have learned that the absolution, the forgiveness of sins by the priest, was given after the imposition of the satisfaction made by doing good works. However, these good works have not yet been done at the moment when the absolution is granted. This means that there is no assurance that satisfaction will indeed be made. Making this satisfaction is urgent, for by committing sin, in particular the deadly sins of murder, theft, sexual impurity, perjury, etcetera, one deserves to be cast into hell. However, according to the Roman-Catholic doctrine, the church has been authorised to change this eternal punishment into a temporal one, to be carried in this life or in purgatory. Even this temporal punishment can be remitted. This, then, is affected by offering indulgences. Upon payment of a certain sum of money one can obtain partial or complete remittance.

This is possible – and this is another underlying concept – because the church has a kind of fund, "the church's treasure". The church has a surplus of good works, done by the Lord Jesus Himself and by the saints, for example by means of their dying as martyrs. Those, then, who show their shortcomings and are willing to pay for them, can fall back on this 'balance'. One can even do so for the benefit of beloved ones who are already suffering in purgatory.

An illustration from previous centuries of such an indulgence was one's participation in or financial support to the crusades. By selling indulgences Johann Tetzel tried to collect funds for the completion of the church of St. Peter, the pope's personal church in Rome!

13. Before we look further into what Martin Luther, John Calvin and other reformers offered as a reformative alternative of the 'sacrament of penance', we must consider an important aspect of it.

It is this that, according to Roman-Catholic doctrine and practice, it is closely related with holy baptism.

The Church of Rome teaches that baptism washes away the sins in which we were conceived and born, original sin.

Why, then, is the 'sacrament of penance' so important? Because after baptism we can spoil everything, and do indeed spoil it. We commit all kinds of sins, even deadly sins. Man is no longer pure and holy. This, then, requires another act of purification, and it is exactly at this point that the 'sacrament of penance' arrives at the scene. It absolves the penitent from what he did wrong after his baptism, from a well deserved eternal condemnation.

This new sacrament is sometimes called "a second life-saving raft", after our shipwreck of falling into sin, and the subsequent loss of the first raft, Baptism.

Without it there is no guarantee of our life ending in a transfer into heaven, and this is exactly what the Church of Rome would like to give to all its members.

Is not that chain of seven sacraments intended to safeguard one's life from its very beginning to its very end? Baptism, confirmation, auricular confession, ordination as a priest, or marriage, the mass, and extreme unction, they each and all are claimed to infuse grace into man (grace is considered to be something almost material, *gratia infusa*).

14. Because the reformers saw this as one of the fundamental errors in Rome's doctrine and practice, they vehemently rejected the 'sacrament of penance'. Behind it they discovered an entirely wrong concept of what "*living with the LORD*" means, even an entirely wrong concept of God Himself.

To them Baptism was not the first life-saving raft, and auricular confession the second one. Indeed, they strongly emphasised the great significance of holy baptism. The door to the communion with the LORD God, enjoyed in the Lord's Table particularly, is not opened by auricular confession, but by God's free grace in Jesus Christ, sealed and confirmed in holy baptism. Baptism as the seal of God's promise of grace, Baptism as the sacrament of one's dying with Christ, and rising to life again in and with Him, is the strong guarantee that our whole life can be a matter of living with God, and afterwards the entry into the fullness of life with Him.

15. Our main concern in this article is that we may learn to see how the 'three parts' of sin, grace, and gratitude, as we read them in our Catechism and in the forms for Baptism and the Lord's Supper, are the reformatory alternative of the medieval 'sacrament of penance' or the auricular confession with its three parts of contrition or remorse, confession, and satisfaction.

Whereas the 'sacrament of penance' is dominant in the Roman-Catholic chain of (seven) sacraments, which cover one's whole life, from cradle to grave, this is the same with the 'three parts' of our Reformed Church Service Book.

We have already heard Martin Luther state in the very first of the Ninety-Five Theses that "*the believers' whole life must be a penitential exercise*".

We also have heard its echo in Answer 115 of the Heidelberg Catechism where it says "*that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly for the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ*",

and

*"that we may be zealous for good deeds, and constantly pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that He may more and more renew us after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection"*.

These 'three parts', in particular in their formulation of No.115, are a faithful definition of a believer's life with God.

16. We owe this 'reformatory alternative' to men such as Martin Luther, William Farel, John Calvin, Zacharias Ursinus, and others.

Since Martin Luther was the first of those it almost imperative that we briefly explain what he has taught in this respect.

Luther has dealt with the issue of penance or penitence in several of his works. Apart from the Ninety-Five Theses there are the sermons which he delivered on the so-called penitential Psalms, his work *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), a special treatise on auricular confession, *Von der Beicht* (1521), and his two catechisms, the *Larger Catechism* and the *Shorter Catechism*, both written in the year 1529.

17. It is true that Luther maintained auricular confession, for some time even as a sacrament.

However, from the very beginning he rejected the idea that the church could forgive sins. It is not the church doing this but God's Word. Therefore faith in God's Word is essential.

That he maintained this confession may be explained by the fact that he had to react to the extremism of the Anabaptists' spiritualism which did away with all kinds of 'external' things. Besides, Luther was eager to obtain the firm assurance of remittance.

However – it may be repeated – he sought this assurance in God's promise.

This is why we can say that the publication of the Ninety-Five Theses on the 31st of October 1517 was a reformative act, although at that time Luther still considered himself to be a faithful son of the church (of Rome). For in his second thesis rejecting the idea that the church, by means of the priestly office, would have the authority and ability to forgive sins, he put the Word of God above the church – whereas, in fact, the Church of Rome does exactly the opposite.

This made him deny – from the year 1520 onwards – that auricular confession is a sacrament. There are only two sacraments: "Baptism and the Bread". A sacrament has a visible sign, and this is missing in the 'sacrament of penance'.

It is also characterised by having been instituted by God or His Christ.

Martin Luther was the first to emphasise what was later included in Reformed confessions and catechisms, the divine institution of the sacraments.<sup>12</sup>

18. One particular aspect of Martin Luther's teaching in respect of a believer's penitence is that, clearly in his opinion, it means a return to Baptism.

The importance of this statement may be apparent as soon as we realise that in the thinking of the Church of Rome any act of sin destroys the power and fruit of Baptism. Baptism has the power to wash away sins, but as soon as one falls into sin, he destroys the fruit of Baptism. Therefore the 'sacrament of penance' is needed time and again, at least once a year, to restore the sinner into the 'state of grace'. However, according to Luther God's grace is not just offered automatically, by an act of the church, but it reaches out to us from God's Word, in His promise. This promise was sealed to us in holy Baptism, but the same promise is repeated, time and again, in the preaching of God's Word.<sup>13</sup> In this preaching we are called back to our Baptism, and this is done 'from the cradle to the grave'.<sup>14</sup>

Here we are given an important 'hint' especially for our preaching on the 'first part' of our Catechism, and, in a more general sense, for exhorting the congregational members to confess their sins and sinfulness. We hope to elaborate on this in our final issue.

For, and this can again be learned from Martin Luther, Baptism is a seal of the promise of forgiveness of sins, but what forgiveness means becomes very clear from what we find in Romans 6:

*"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus have been baptised into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life".*

(Romans 6:3, 4)

It was no wonder that Martin Luther preferred Baptism by immersion above Baptism by sprinkling, because the former symbolises more clearly this dying with Christ and rising again with Him.

19. Another aspect of Luther's teaching is that auricular confession cannot be considered to be a good work. The confession of sins has no meritorious value. We must listen to what God has to say to us in the preaching of His Word, and receive this with thankfulness.<sup>15</sup>
20. Finally, in the doctrine and practice of the Church of Rome faith has been given barely a place, or even no place at all, for it is not the 'use' but the 'administration' of the sacrament that gives assurance of God's grace. Nevertheless Luther strongly emphasises the necessity of faith, for at the same time God's promise is a command, the command to believe it.

Was not Luther's whole reformatory work based on the text which he so often quoted:

*"He who through faith is righteous shall live"?*<sup>16</sup>

Did he not characterise a Christian's life by means of the phrase: *"simul justus et peccator"*, which means: that whilst a believer is righteous before God, he is still a sinner?

21. We will be brief on other reformers.

In the year 1534 William Farel, who was instrumental in young John Calvin's decision to stay at Geneva, wrote a booklet entitled *Le Sommaire*, indeed a summary of biblical doctrine, over against the doctrine and practice of the Church of Rome.<sup>17</sup>

In this booklet Farel wrote separate chapters on, respectively, each of the three parts of the 'sacrament of penance'.

On the first part, contrition or remorse, he says that confessing sins means honouring God by professing His goodness, power, and wisdom, glorifying and worshipping Him.

As for the second part, it is apparent that in the 'sacrament of penance' Christ's satisfaction is deemed to be insufficient.

And regarding satisfaction Farel states that the Church of Rome uses auricular confession as a powerful weapon, for example against the civil rulers, because the whole of their secret life is known to the clergy. Monetary punishments in particular are very profitable to the Church of Rome. Therefore the so-called absolution is of no value at all, for only God can forgive us because Christ carried our sins for us.

22. As for John Calvin, he too deals with the three parts of auricular confession one after the other.<sup>18</sup>

There is a surprising consensus between Luther and Calvin when both of them reject the Roman-Catholic doctrine and practice, particularly the compulsory character of auricular confession, its sacramental character, and satisfaction by doing good works.

Calvin placed special emphasis on the fact that real sacraments have been instituted by God.

He too underlined the great significance of Baptism, which he called *"the sacrament of penitence"*.<sup>19</sup>

Penitence is a subject on which John Calvin has written extensively, not only when he dealt with the 'seven sacraments' of the Church of Rome in the fourth book of his *Institutes*, but also in Book III which deals with a Christian's life with God. Penitence is an essential aspect of such a life with God! *"The sum of the gospel is made, not without good reason, to consist in repentance and forgiveness of sins"*, and *"a complete summary of the gospel is included in these two heads viz. repentance and the remission of sins"*.<sup>20</sup>

Calvin is in full harmony with the first of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, when he writes:

*"That believers may attain to it, God assigns repentance as the goal towards which they must keep running during the whole course of their lives"*.<sup>21</sup>

23. We started this article by passing on a remark made by professor C. Trimp. In his opinion

*we possess in the three parts of the Catechism a reformatory alternative for the sacrament of penance, which sacrament used to function in one's preparation for the celebration of the communion with Christ.*

Since then we have learned that this remark was correctly made because it is clearly based on historical material.



However, it was not for nothing that we wrote this article under the heading "Living with the LORD", for we did not intend just to present some material taken from history. We needed it to demonstrate to our readers that we can learn many things from this material, things from which our spiritual life can benefit.

Even the Roman-Catholic doctrine and practice is closely connected with the desire to have a good relationship with God. Of course, the Church of Rome is entirely wrong in this respect, and its doctrine is heretical because it is based on a wrong concept of God and His grace, a wrong concept also of Christ's meritorious work, as if it were insufficient, and a wrong concept of God the Holy Spirit Who has been replaced by sacramental acts performed by the church. The communion with God and Christ, which they attempt to make possible by the introduction of the 'sacrament of penance' is not the communion of the covenant of grace. Nevertheless communion with God is still the aim.

Our own aim is expressed in the title of this article: life with the LORD.

Our brief dip into church history may have taught us to discover a number of things behind certain passages in our official papers, from which our spiritual life can profit. We may also learn how rich we are with our Reformed confessional standards. We may also learn how these things can be beneficial to our life in the communion with God, when – as our Catechism is doing – this life with the LORD is described in terms of the 'three parts' of our only comfort both in life and death.

It is remarkable that after the great theme of the Catechism has been heard the question which follows immediately, Question and Answer 1, includes the word joy: *"What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?"*

24. Elaborating on a few things we have learned from the historical material, first, it may be recalled how the 'sacrament of penance' aimed at re-opening the way to the Communion in the Mass. Certainly and incorrectly, the Church of Rome considers this to be communion with the Lord Jesus Christ. The reformers saw this quite clearly, and, as a result rejected the sacramental character of auricular confession. They replaced this 'preparation' with a Scriptural one, which consists of the well known 'three parts', included in the Form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. For without this preparation communion with the LORD God cannot be enjoyed.

This is why we find these 'three parts' again in the Form for Baptism of Infants, for they describe life within the communion of God's covenant of grace to which our children also belong. Consequently they are elaborately explained to our youngsters in the Heidelberg Catechism. For as they are growing up our boys and girls must, under God's blessing, be taught what it means, to live with the LORD.

25. Our communion with God and Christ in the celebration of the Lord's Supper may be called a climax in our life with the LORD, but at the same time it is only part of the communion with Him.

Since the last revision of the Form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper it is even emphasised that *"we receive at His table a foretaste of the abundant joy which He (Christ) has promised and look forward to the marriage feast of the Lamb, when He will drink the wine new with us in the Kingdom of His Father"*.

Life with the LORD, presently everlasting life in His immediate presence, is our topic!

26. This leads us to another aspect of all we have learned from our browsing through church history: holy Baptism plays a significant role in this respect.

We have learned how Martin Luther highlighted the function of Baptism. Over against the Roman-Catholic doctrine that every sin destroys the fruit of this sacrament, which really washes away original sin, he states: Every good sermon is a repetition of what was signified and sealed in Baptism, God's promise of the grace of forgiveness and renewal. We heard John

Calvin put his own weight to this emphasis on the significance of holy Baptism for our life with the LORD.

This is how in a refreshing way we learned to read the sentence in the baptismal form which refers to the fact that we have an eternal covenant with God, so that there is no reason to fall into despair when time and again we are confronted with our weaknesses, We have no need of a special 'sacrament of penance'. Holy Baptism is enough!

27. There is even more detail, not previously mentioned, which sheds a surprising light upon certain passages with which we are familiar, sometimes even too familiar because we listen to them at regular or irregular intervals.

We will give just one single illustration. Around the 'sacrament of penance' a large number of books and booklets were published, the so-called confession-mirrors. This name indicated the possibility of someone to examining himself with the help of a 'catalogue of sins'.<sup>22</sup>

This may explain the presence of a similar list of sins in our Form for the Lord's Supper. This catalogue of sins is a simple one, following the line of the Ten Commandments, but in the meantime it points at concrete sins.

It is very useful to carry out the same examination even apart from the Lord's Supper, for example at the end of a day, asking ourselves: Was our life without any gossip, without any impure thought? We are all inclined to feel satisfied when we have confessed our sins and sinfulness in general terms, but it is very useful to try to locate our particular personal weaknesses.

On the other hand we must realise that we will never be able to produce a full list of all our sins. This is why the reformers objected against the long and detailed lists of sins summed up in the confessional mirrors.<sup>23</sup>

28. The very significant place occupied by holy Baptism in our life with God also determines the way sin is dealt with through preaching in church and also through education at home, school, and catechism-class.

We will restrict ourselves to the preaching, particularly on Catechism-preaching on the 'first part', that of "Our sin and misery".

It is really striking that in answer to the question, "*What does God's Law require of us?*" it is stated: "*Christ teaches us this in a summary*". It may be known that what follows can also be read in the Old Testament, the "*great and first commandment*" in Deuteronomy 6:5, and the "*second like it*" in Leviticus 19:18. However, it says: "*Christ teaches us this*". Self-examination along the lines of the two great commandments, or the more detailed Ten Commandments, is expected to be undertaken on the basis of one's knowledge of the gospel. In the Ten Commandments the gospel is proclaimed in the 'preface' of God's Law: "*I am the LORD your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*". In other words: preaching on the Law of God must always be based on the covenant of grace and be preaching of Christ. Being our Lord and Master He is fully entitled to expect us to obey His commandments, these blessing rules set for our life with God.

A preaching which merely sums up all sorts of possible sins without making it clear that no one less than our Saviour requires love and obedience, will have no positive fruit. The results of the preaching in 'very strict' churches may prove this.

29. The same matter can also be approached from another angle. Remembering the place our Catechism originally took in the Church Order of the Palatinate, we realise that the Catechism was and is supposed to be taught to baptised young people. We may also remember how the reformers based the confession of sins on Baptism. The preaching of God's Word is a weekly repetition of the promise of grace which was sealed and confirmed to us in holy Baptism: Our younger and older church members, who are addressed in – even 'penitential' – sermons, are

all baptised people. Calling them to repentance and to honouring the obligation to a new obedience, must always be done by appealing to what God promised and symbolised in Baptism: the dying of our old nature and the coming to life of the new nature, our burial with Christ by Baptism into death, and our being raised to a new life by being united with Christ in His resurrection.<sup>24</sup>

30. We can be grateful for the fact that the 'three parts' return in our Catechism in Lord's Day 44, when the explanation of the Ten Commandments has been completed and the attention will be focussed on the Lord's Prayer. Then we are in the middle of the 'third part', that of gratitude, the part which teaches us what kind of life is expected from us, a life with God.

It is exactly at this stage that the 'three parts' are mentioned again. A number of pages earlier the Catechism had dealt with the two sacraments: holy Baptism which was already administered to the students of the Catechism, and the Lord's Supper towards which they are led under God's blessing. On this basis, life in the covenant communion with the LORD is described.

It is a life full of weaknesses, caused by our sinful nature which plays up time and again. It is very useful that by testing ourselves along the lines of God's commandments we may become more and more aware of our sinful nature, so that we may more eagerly flee to Christ.

Therefore it is also a life in which Christians *"appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in Whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him"*.<sup>25</sup>

It is a life of being *"zealous for good deeds"*, of a serious and strong desire *"from now on to live for Him"*, to live for Christ,<sup>26</sup> always wanting to do better than previously. Therefore it is a prayer-life: a constant prayer is required *"for the grace of the Holy Spirit that He may more and more renew us after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection"*.

A Christian should never be content with himself. Self-satisfaction is one of the strongest dangers for his life in the covenant with God. There should indeed be a kind of vicious circle: seeing the shortcomings in his life, because he cannot keep God's commandments perfectly, he must flee to Christ, and then he will be eager to show his gratitude for God's grace in Christ in a life close to the LORD; and then, being again confronted with his weaknesses and shortcomings because his old nature still plays its role, he has to plead again for mercy in Christ's name; a vicious circle.

It should be even more than that: an upward spiral motion. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit a Christian's life must be characterised by the words *"more and more"*, by growth and increase. For he is being prepared for an everlasting life in the communion with the triune God.

31. In this "reformatory alternative" to the poor life that is dominated by the 'sacrament of penance', we possess great riches. The latter is based on the idea that man can contribute to his own salvation, the former is a rich life because it is a life under the free grace of God which our Saviour has obtained for us.

Being Reformed is a wealthy privilege!

G VanRongen

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Reference is made to the book *De zonde uit beeld, Bijbels schuldbesef en modern levensgevoel*, ed. by Dr.J.W.Maris and Dr.F.van der Pol, Barneveld 1995. Soon after its publication the weekly magazine *De Reformatie* filled the whole issue of 1 April 1995, Volume 70 No.27, with a multiple review of this book.

<sup>2</sup> C.Trimp, *Prediking van de wet: gezondmakende leer. Enige overwegingen bij antwoord 115 van de Catechismus*, in the book referred to in the previous note.

<sup>3</sup> J.Kamphuis, *Luther over de boete*, in C.Graafland ed., *Luther en het gereformeerde protestantisme*, 's-Gravenhage 1982, 183-206.

<sup>4</sup> Yet we mention professor Kamphuis' article because we have learned many things from it. The same can be said of other literature on the same subject, for example M. J. Arntzen, *Biecht en vergeving van zonden*, Kampen 1961, and C. Riemens, *Luther en het sacrament van de boetvaardigheid*, Kampen 1967.

<sup>5</sup> For those who would like to make some further study of this interesting document – recommended in particular to my colleagues! – I may mention its title: *Wilhelm Niesel, Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche*, 2nd edition, Zurich 1938.

<sup>6</sup> The complete text of the Catechism was also included in that Church Order.

<sup>7</sup> Our readers may be interested to learn that this public profession did not simply consist of a number of answers to questions, but the candidates were supposed to be able to recite the Apostle Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Catechism questions and answers regarding the Lord's Supper. Yes, in public!

<sup>8</sup> The first question read (in my translation): "Therefore I ask you first of all whether you, together with me, confess this before God's countenance, and therefore detest yourselves, and thirst after the righteousness and grace of Jesus Christ?" The question after the exposition of the 'second part' simply reads: "Is this your belief?" After the 'third part' there was no formal question, but the members were expected to respond to it with another "I do".

<sup>9</sup> After the text of the Catechism itself the Church Order of the Palatinate contained a series of Scripture places "from which everyone in his own situation could learn what must be done in his own profession". This shows Martin Luther's influence again, for in his Shorter Catechism Luther had a similar series: texts regarding the duties of the elders and ministers, of the civil government and their subjects, of married men, married women, parents, children, employees and employers, youngsters, widows and the congregation. In the Church Order of the Palatinate then the Summary of the Catechism followed, which was supposed to be read at the beginning of the afternoon-services, in which a Catechism sermon would be delivered.

<sup>10</sup> *Didach* 4-14 and 14-1 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Those who would like to read more about this development, and are able to read Dutch, are referred to my book *Met al de heiligen*, Barneveld 1990, III 30ff.

<sup>12</sup> Belgic Confession of Faith Article 33; Heidelberg Catechism No's 66, 68, 69, 71, 74, 75, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Here again Luther's influence can be clearly seen, an influence that lasted even after the Palatinate turned to Calvinism. Together with the Catechism our baptismal form originates from the Palatinate. It so beautifully states: "And if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins, we must not despair of God's mercy not continue in sin, for baptism is a seal and trustworthy testimony, that we have an eternal covenant with God". Our churches have learned to confess this from Martin Luther!

<sup>14</sup> Here Luther replaces the process of 'from cradle to grave' in the seven so-called sacraments of the Church of Rome by the Scriptural cradle-grave process.

<sup>15</sup> Luther states this at the end of his *Larger Catechism*, when he gives an exposition of auricular confession. Putting the emphasis on the requirement of gratitude or thankfulness, he may remind us of the 'third part' of our Catechism, showing us that the 'three parts' of our Catechism and of other official documents, are indeed a reformative alternative of the 'sacrament of penance'.

<sup>16</sup> Romans 1:17.

<sup>17</sup> The lack of interest in this booklet may be explained by the publication of John Calvin's Institutes, but is regrettable, for in a simple way it deals with the main points of what Scripture teaches, of course with special application to the needs of its own day. The booklet deserves a translation from old French into several other languages, to the benefit of the Reformed churches and individual believers living throughout the world.

<sup>18</sup> On contrition he writes in Book III, section IV paragraphs 2-3, on confession in paragraphs 4-24, and in 25-39 on satisfaction. Also in some of his commentaries on Bible-books he deals with the 'sacrament of penance'.

<sup>19</sup> "You will speak most correctly, therefore, if you call baptism the sacrament of penitence, seeing it is given to those who aim at repentance to confirm their faith and seal their confidence" (*Institutes* IV, XIX, 17).

<sup>20</sup> *Institutes* III, III 1 and 19. Here we can observe a line which runs parallel with what Calvin writes about the marks of the true church: sometimes he seems to restrict them to two only. In the context of Book III he mentions the first and

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second of the 'three parts' only, but in a different context he deals with gratitude also, just as at places other than in the section on the church he deals with church discipline.

<sup>21</sup> *Institutes* III, III, 9.

<sup>22</sup> A certain Benedictine monk from the 12th century, calling himself "Honorius Augustodunensis ecclesiae presbyter et scholasticus", a very learned man, wrote a book entitled *Speculum Ecclesiae, Mirror of the Church*. Apart from a number of sermon-outlines this book presents the full liturgy of the preaching service as it had been developed in some regions of Southern Germany, Eastern France and Northern Switzerland. One of the elements in this preaching service, called *pronaus*, was a confession of sins. It contains a kind of catalogue of sins, starting with the admission that the penitent has not kept "the promise which was made for me in Baptism", then continuing with summing up the sins committed. Among them were the following: "I have not been to church as often as I should, and in church I did not show the discipline expected from me"; "I have never loved my father and mother and my boss, and submitted to them, as I should. I have not been obedient to my priest and other doctors (teachers) set over me by God, as I was due to be"; "I have committed the sins of perjury, theft, plundering, false testimony, slander, drunkenness, sorcery, fraud, and any sin a man can commit".

<sup>23</sup> The (Lutheran) Augsburg Confession (1530) states in Article IV: "our churches teach that the enumeration of sins is not necessary, nor are consciences to be burdened with the care of enumerating all sins, inasmuch as it is impossible to recant all sins, as the Psalm (xix.12) testifies: 'Who can understand his errors?' So also Jeremiah (xvii.9): 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?' But if no sins were remitted except what were recounted, consciences could never find peace, because very many sins they neither see nor can remember". In his *Institutes* John Calvin writes (III, IV, 17): "Here let my readers consider whether it be possible to take an account of the action of a whole year, or even to collect the sins committed in a single day, seeing every man's experience convinces him that at evening, in examining the faults of a single day, memory gets confused, so great is the number and variety presented". See also Arntzen 14, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Lord's Day 33 Heidelberg Catechism and Romans 6:3-5 respectively.

<sup>25</sup> Article 29 Belgic Confession of Faith on "the marks of Christians".

<sup>26</sup> Lord's Day 1 No.1.