

LESSON 17

Belgic Confession Articles 27-29 The Church (II)

General:

In this lesson we examine our responsibility towards and in the Church and see how we must distinguish between the "true" and the "false" Church.

1. The Church: Our Responsibility

While the Church belongs to Christ and is gathered by Him (see: previous lesson), we do have a specific responsibility towards and in this Church.

Christ gathers = we (must) come together. The Confession uses two words to stress both aspects:

Congregatio
(gathering)

Coetus
(coming together)

Our responsibility is two-fold:

- a) towards the Church: "... all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the Church" (Article 28). This is an important matter, for the confession says, "There is no salvation outside of [this Church]," i.e. Christ gives salvation and the means of grace ("the ministry of reconciliation," 2 Corinthians 5) to His true Church and not to the false Church or the world. Ephesians 4:3, "... eager to *maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...."
- b) in the Church: everyone must "serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body" (Article 28). The Catechism states, "... everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members." (Lord's Day 21, Question and Answer 55). The Church is also "communion of saints" and the members are therefore mutually obligated. 1 Corinthians 12:25, "... that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another."

The Church is *one* and is gathered *in* the unity of the true faith. This is a characteristic of the Church. The question is always whether *we maintain* this unity, or "act contrary to the ordinance of God" (Article 28). Failure to be a "living member" of Christ's Church is a transgression of God's Law, and therefore dangerous to oneself and one's children (see the second commandment about God's punishment unto the third and fourth generation over self-determined, idolatrous worship).

2. The True and the False Church (Article 29)

The Confession distinguishes between the "true Church" and "all sects" which call themselves "the Church." Similarly, the Confession also speaks of "the false Church," primarily meaning (at the time of conception) the Roman Catholic Church (without excluding all the sects mentioned earlier).

The word "sect" (coming from the Latin verb, "sequi," to follow) denotes those who "follow" false teachers who "pervert the Gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:7) under the pretense of bringing the Truth.

This distinction between "Church" and "sects" and between the "true Church" and the "false Church" is fully *scriptural*:

- a) in the warning against false *doctrine* (Colossians 2:8, 20)
- b) in the warning against false prophets and teachers (2 Peter 2:1-4)
- c) in the warning against "the harlot of Babylon" (Revelation 18) who commits fornication with the "kings of the earth" (false church and worldly powers).

In order to distinguish between the one and the other(s), the Confession urges us "to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true Church."

1 John 4:1, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone into the world."

The Confession states that these two Churches are easily recognized and distinguished from each other. This will, however, be more clear in one case than another, since the process and extent of "deformation" is not everywhere the same.

3. The Marks of the Church

The Scriptures give various "marks" by which the true Church is known. These marks are not the same as the "characteristics," which describe its exclusive character, as given in the previous lesson. The marks are the divinely-given *norms* by which the Church is to live and abide.

The marks are given as follows:

- a) "It practices the pure preaching of the gospel" (2 Timothy 3:10-17).
- b) "It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them" (1 Corinthians 11:17-33).
- c) "It exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins" (1 Corinthians 5:3-5; Titus 3:10).

Preaching – Sacraments – Discipline

These are Christ's *norms*, and must therefore be *rule* in the Church and in all the Churches. The question is never whether there are still "some" who adhere to the norms, but whether the Church in its organization and worship adheres fully.

In contrast, the marks of the false Church are:

- a) ascribing more power to the Church than the Word of God (adding to or subtracting from the Word, Revelation 22)
- b) usage of sacraments contrary to Christ's institution (either depreciation or overemphasis – sacramentalism)
- c) relying more upon men than on Christ (hierarchy) and persecution of true believers.

The *central* question is: does a Church govern itself according to the pure Word of God? Is it on the right *foundation*, or not? Here lies the basic difference between the *true* and the *false* Church.

The words "true" and "false" must be correctly understood.

True: the "real" Church, *faithful* to the Word of God.

False: (can be taken both actively and passively) "imitation-church," unfaithful, and therefore *misleading*, whether it intends to do so or not. The "intention" is not decisive; the *practice* determines whether a Church is true or false. (For intention, see: John 16:2.)

4. The Marks of the Christian

When the Confession speaks of the "marks of the Church," it does not mean to imply that this Church is "perfect." In this life, the Church is never absolutely "pure," but rather "mixed." There are "hypocrites who are mixed in the Church along with the good and yet are not part of the Church, although they are outwardly in it" (Article 29), as chaff is mixed in with wheat, see: Acts 5.

Hypocrites are "imitation-Christians," covered with a thin veneer of Christian paint, who may show a great outward religiosity (and are therefore hard to uncover), but whose heart is closed to Christ. The Confession makes these remarks to refute the heresy:

- a) that all members of the Church are by the very fact of membership saved (Roman Catholicism)
- b) that the Church already on this earth consists only of true believers (Anabaptists, who taught a Church of the Regenerated).

In order to bring the members to correct self-examination, the Confession gives the marks – norms – by which Christians are to live.

The "marks of Christians" are the following:

- a) *faith* in Jesus Christ (Justification)
- b) avoid sin, in a life of holiness (Sanctification)
- c) remaining true and steadfast (Perseverance).

This does not imply any "perfection" in the believers, but indicates their renewal of heart and their ongoing struggle of faith.

Christ will "present" the Church to His Father as a bride-without-blemish, Jude 1:24.

5. The Office of All Believers

In Lord's Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism, we confess the office of all believers. This means that all believers have a common task and calling. There we also find what it means to be called a Christian. This office, like the Office of Christ, is threefold:

- a) (prophetic) to confess Christ's name
- b) (priestly) to present oneself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Christ.
- c) (royal) to fight against sin and the devil and hereafter to reign with Him eternally over all creatures. (See also page 109).

QUESTIONS (Lesson 17):

1. What is our (two-fold) responsibility to the Church of Christ?
2. What is the meaning of the word "sect"?
3. Why does the Confession distinguish between the true Church and sects and false Church?
4. What are "marks"?
5. What are the marks of the true Church and the false Church?
6. What are the marks of Christians?
7. What are the basic meanings of the words "true" and "false"?
8. What are "hypocrites"?
9. Why is the Church never "pure" or "perfect" in this life?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory Work: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21, Questions and Answers 55 and 114.