

LESSON 16

Belgic Confession Articles 27-29 The Church (I)

General:

In this lesson we examine the Scriptural confession concerning the Church of Christ.

1. The Church: Christ's Master-piece

The word "church" literally means "that which belongs to the Lord" ("*Kuriakos*" -*k-r-k*; compare; "kirk," "kirche," "kerk").

Christ gathers the Church out of this world by His Word and Spirit, and He must therefore be considered as its only *head*. Therefore the Church is also called "ecclesia" = called out, chosen, separated unto God and His service.

The Scriptures use various examples to show the close relationship which there is between Christ and the Church:

- a) Head and body (1 Corinthians 12:27)
- b) Shepherd and flock (John 10:11)
- c) Vine and branches (John 15:5)
- d) Cornerstone and stones (1 Peter 2:4; Ephesians 2:20)
- e) Groom and bride (Revelation 19:7).

Since the Scriptures speak of the Church as "the body of Christ" and the "household of God" (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Timothy 3:15), it is evident that the Church is not a voluntary association of men but is a *divine masterpiece*. Christ Himself specifically spoke of the Church as "My Church" (Matthew 16:18). Therefore the Church is not what we would "like" it to be, but what Christ has determined it to be.

Most heresies concerning the Church have this faulty beginning: the Church is regarded from a human viewpoint as an "attempt" of man to come to a religious association. The *reformed* confession stresses that the Church is fully a work of Christ.

2. The Characteristics of the Church

The Apostolic Confession (400 A.D.) already formulated a simple article concerning the Church of Christ, "I believe a holy, catholic, Christian Church, the communion of saints." This article is explained in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21, and in Article 27 of the Belgic Confession.

The Confession does *not* state, "I believe *in* . . . the Church," for this would ascribe redeeming power to the Church (Roman Catholicism). We believe only *in* God, and further we believe the Word of God that Christ gathers the Church "as a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers"

This Church has various characteristics:

- a) *holy*, i.e. set apart and dedicated to the service of God, or as the Catechism says, "chosen to everlasting life." This emphasizes the fact that Christ sanctifies His Church by His blood and Spirit. This does not imply that the Church has a holiness in itself, but stresses what it has and must be in Christ
Leviticus 19:2, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."
1 Peter 2:9, "A chosen race . . . royal priesthood . . . a holy nation . . . God's own people . . ."
- b) *catholic*: i.e. universal or "worldwide." This Church is not confined or limited to a certain place, time or certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world (Article 27). Christ gathers from the beginning of the world (Genesis 3:15) to the end (Lord's Day 21). If for a time God's grace was restricted to *Israel*, this had a special purpose (to bring forth the Christ according to the flesh) and nevertheless retained the perspective of catholicity (Psalm 147:20 as compared to Psalm 87:6). The catholic character of the Church is especially evident in the apostolic ministry (Ephesians 2:13)
- c) *apostolic*: this characteristic is stressed in the *Nicene Creed*, and it denotes the doctrinal basis of the Church, the witness of the apostles concerning the redemptive work of Christ (Ephesians 2:20; 1 John 1:1-4)
- d) *unity*: this Church is gathered by Christ in "the unity of the true faith" (Lord's Day 21) and "is joined and united with heart and will in one and the same Spirit" (Article 27). This especially denotes the norm according to which Christ gathers: *unity in truth* (John 17:11). Any unity which does not base itself on this Truth is deception.

3. The Foundation of the Church

The Confession states in Article 29 that the basic mark of the Church is that "it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head." The Scriptures speak of the *foundation* of the Church as follows:

- a) Christ Himself is the Foundation (as well as the Head), having become the *cornerstone* through His death and resurrection
1 Corinthians 3:11, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is *Jesus Christ*."
- b) The Apostolic witness and the prophecies of old (God's *complete* revelation) is the foundation of the Church, since this prophetic testimony points to Christ as the only Mediator.

Ephesians 2:20, "... built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets."

We combine the two as follows: Christ as He is revealed in the complete Scriptures, is the *only* foundation and Head of the Church.

QUESTIONS (Lesson 16):

1. What does the word "church" mean?
2. What is another word for "church" in the Scriptures?
3. What examples does Scripture use for the relationship Christ – Church?
4. What is the basic heresy concerning the Church?
5. What are the "characteristics" of the Church?
6. What is the foundation of the Church?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory work: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21, Question and Answer 54.