

LESSON 18

Belgic Confession Articles 27-29 The Church (III)

General:

In this lesson we examine some common theories about the Church of Christ and confess the principle of "semper reformandum."

1. Common Theories about the Church

There are various theories about the Church which all show some basic similarities:

- a) the idea that the Church is a "voluntary association of man" or a "free society" of people with like ideals and beliefs and that there is no specific divine norm for the Church (humanism, see Lesson 16)
- b) the idea that every Church is a mere "attempt" to arrive at an acceptable form, but that no Church may claim to be the "true Church" at the expense of others. Churches may organize into "denominations," but they are to recognize and assist one another as true Churches of Christ. There can at most be varying degrees of purity, but in essence all these Churches are one (denominationalism)
- c) the idea that the Church is basically an *invisible* organism and simply "manifests" itself in various *forms* (institutions), whereby all the various Churches form the one invisible Church of Christ (Theory of Pluriformity; Invisible Church concept).

All these *theories* intend to "explain" (= make acceptable) the apparent disunity among Christians or to reconcile a visible reality (disunity) with a Biblical norm (unity in Truth). In reality, such theories are only a cover-up of a sad and distressing situation, and impede the true process of unification. In contrast, our Confession teaches in the Articles 27-29 that the Church is not a human effort or attempt, but a work of Christ, gathered according to His clearly revealed *norms*, thus showing only *one* form of doctrine and worship. We are not to accept various degrees of "purity," but must strive to be "perfect" (Matthew 5:48) according to the Will of God. Christ does not "accept" impurity, but exhorts His Church to heed His admonitions and constantly to be reformed according to His Word. The call to repentance is combined with the warning, "If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Revelation 2:5).

Therefore we confess the principle:

Ecclesia reform a ta semper reformanda.

A reformed Church must always *be* reformed.

Because of the attacks from within and without, the Church must be on guard against deformation and be prepared always to return to the pure service of God.

De-formation = departure from God's Word.

Re-formation = return to God's Word.

2. The Invisible Church?

A common idea about the Church (indicated under 1. c) is the notion of the *invisible church*. The invisible Church is then thought to be "the whole number of the *elect* that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof . . ." (Westminster Confession, Article 25-1).

This Church stands in contrast to the "*visible Church*" which "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children . . ." (Westminster Confession, Article 25-2). This visible Church is "more or less pure."

The great *danger* in this theory is that "membership" of the *visible Church* (and even, *which* visible Church?) becomes somewhat relative. Decisive is that one is a member of the *invisible Church*, and the result may be that one ultimately comes to live with the impurities of the visible Church. The Westminster Confession might (unintentionally) promote such thinking by not clearly listing the *marks* of the (visible) Church.

Moreover, the Scriptures and the Belgic Confession do not at all speak of this distinction between invisible-visible. The word "Church" in the Belgic Confession can mean a local Church or the catholic (entire) Church, but *nowhere* does it denote an invisible superstructure as opposed to a visible institution.

The Church is always *visible* in its doctrine, offices, worship and members and must therefore be sought locally according to the norms of Christ. Local Churches will diligently seek sister Churches elsewhere and unite for all good purpose in a *federation* of Churches.

We do confess that for us the Church is "*unoverseeable*" (since it is gathered out of all times and places, and only God knows the exact number of His children) and "for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man" (Article 27, Belgic Confession), but all this does not render the Church invisible.

Revelation 7:9, "... a great multitude which no man could number . . ."

3. Appeal to Unity in Truth

No Church ought to hold the pretense that only within itself are found the true believers. Nevertheless, a Church which by God's grace faithfully lives according to the norms of Christ, however imperfectly, may certainly in grateful humility lay claim to the title "true Church" (in the sense of Article 29), and call others to be enjoined with it in the one worship of God.

It is the calling of Christ's Church to maintain *unity* (= communion in faith and fellowship, concretely expressed in the one *table* of the Lord) but never to realize or falsely cling to unity at the cost of the *truth*.

John 17:17, 21, "Sanctify them in the Truth; Thy Word is Truth;
... that they may all be one"

QUESTIONS (Lesson 18):

1. What are some common theories about the Church?
2. What is the danger in these theories?
3. Explain the principle of "semper reformanda."
4. Why do we not speak of an "invisible Church"?
5. On what basis may we call others to join with us in worship?