

Chapter 4: Taught here in This Church!

Occasionally one may hear the following remark: when you make profession of faith, it is not important in which church you do this. After all, it is your *faith* you are confessing, is it not? That is to say: you confess that Jesus Christ is your Saviour. You are not confessing a saving *church*, are you? And then it is often added: surely at the gates of heaven you won't be asked to which church you belonged? What matters is that you love the Lord Jesus! Therefore we should shake hands across the walls between churches, and not consider "our" church as "the" church. We may not agree on all points of doctrine and faith, but in the end we are all one in Christ. And so we speak of unity of faith rather than division in faith.

Yet, when you make profession of your faith, it is pointed out to you that you must agree with the doctrine "taught in this Christian church". What does that mean? The phrase "taught in this Christian church" is taken from the form for baptism as it was formulated in 1566 by Petrus Datheen. The father presenting his child for baptism had to confess, also on behalf of his wife, that the doctrine of the church as it was taught in that local church, was the true and complete doctrine of salvation. In the questions for profession of faith as they were drawn up in the Netherlands in 1923, and rendered in English in 1965, 1972 and 2014 in the "Book of Praise", each young person must answer the same question in the affirmative.

The chief question is: where is the church of the Lord Jesus to be found?

The church's struggle

When Petrus Datheen composed the form for baptism (he was a preacher in a refugee congregation in Germany at the time) it wasn't quite five years since Guido de Brès (in what is now Belgium) wrote the Belgic Confession, in defense of reformed doctrine.

In the struggle against the Roman Catholics and the Anabaptists a clear answer was given to the question as to where the church of the Lord was to be found. Many sects, according to the confession, call themselves by the name of church. Rome said the church is where there is the direct, unbroken line of succession from Peter, the first pope, till today.

But the reformed confession replied: the church is where God's Word is being rightly proclaimed – the doctrine contained in the Old and New Testament. In the past this took place in the apostolic church, and that doctrine was then formulated in the Apostles' Creed, but now this takes place

in this Christian church, for the doctrine taught in this Christian church is the one that is contained in the Old and New Testament, and summarized in the creeds.

Whenever the doctrine of the apostles is maintained, the doctrine of the Scriptures, *there* is the lawful continuation of the old, apostolic church.

Continuing struggle

It took courage, the courage of faith, to say or rather profess in the sixteenth century: the church is where the doctrine of the apostles is maintained, where the pure Word of God is preached, without adding to it or taking away from it. This confession at that time had a courageous and bloody result, for the pyres were smoking and the Inquisition persecuted those who dared openly make this confession.

However, the confession and the form for baptism of the sixteenth century don't just give us a snapshot of the struggle involving the church. No, the point is the *norm*, which endures. That is why the wording about the doctrine taught here in *this* Christian church has been retained. It has been retained against attempts to drop the actual address of the church, and against those who would rather speak of an invisible church, and of unity instead of division in faith.

Later in the time of reformation, there were people in the Netherlands who wanted to allow children of non-reformed parents to be baptized. They wanted to be broad-minded towards those who held different beliefs. At one point it even happened that the government of the Netherlands, being rather liberal at the time, prohibited the words "here in this Christian church"! Fortunately, not all reformed preachers adhered to this interference of the state in matters of the church. Also, fortunately, the well-known Synod of Dort 1618/19 restored the form to the original state and retained the phrase about the doctrine in this Christian church.

This small phrase from the baptismal questions (later adapted to questions in the form for public profession of faith) has played a role in every church conflict, also in later ages. Time and again those who wanted to stay reformed said: at stake is the retention of the doctrine of the Scriptures, as taught here in *this* church.

Do we boast of "our" church?

However, by putting such emphasis on the fact that in *this* church the doctrine of the Scriptures is maintained, don't we actually engage in boasting

about "our" church? It is often said we only sing the praises of "our" church, and all the others are no good!

The answer is: the church is not "ours" at all. It is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, which he gathers here on earth! J.C. Sikkel once said in one of his sermons: "God may let our church fall into ruins tonight, as long as his Church still stands!"

The Lord Christ gathers a congregation unto himself. He does that by his Spirit and Word. He does that in the unity of the true faith. The quest for the church is the quest for that true faith, for maintaining and preserving the contents of that faith. These matters are closely connected. When you do profession of faith you cannot push the church aside. You may not say: the church does not really matter. Therefore it is very wrong to say: "at the gates of heaven surely you are not asked to which church you belonged!"

In the first place it is not at all scriptural to speak of "the gates of heaven". Neither is it scriptural to determine what we shall or shall not be asked. In Ecclesiastes the Teacher says: "For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." (Ecclesiastes 12:14) The apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The Saviour himself said: "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak". (Matthew 12:36) The church says in her confession that these are words which the world regarded as mere "jest and amusement" (Belgic Confession, Article 37). But the judgment of the Lord will be over all these things! The Lord will judge in this manner: did we serve him in the church where the doctrine of salvation is kept? In the Bible the church is called a temple, holy to the Lord, in which we too are being built into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:21,22)

Elsewhere the apostle Paul calls the church "a pillar and buttress of the truth." (1 Timothy 3:15) That means the church may bear the truth of God's Word. The words of God have been entrusted to the congregation. "That Word must be preached by the congregation, and kept pure in confession and life." (C. Bouma)

The church is a brightly shining light in a dark world full of deceit. Like a real mother she must raise her children to be faithful witnesses of the truth of God's Word. Cyprian, one of the third century's church fathers, once made

the following bold statement: "You cannot have God for your Father if you do not have the church for your mother."

The reformer Calvin made this statement: "The gospel doesn't just come raining down from the clouds," and: "We shouldn't tempt God and imagine we can fly without wings. God very clearly refers his children to the bosom of the Church." And to the reformer the church is not just any community where religious needs are taken care of. No, to Calvin the church is there where the Word is: "That Word does not just drop from the sky, no, it is brought to us by means of people. If the preaching of God's Word no longer takes place, the saving work of Christ becomes vain. The death of Christ, his life and death, are made meaningless. "

If God's Word does not reign, and if that Word is no longer truly preached, then the church does not exist, for the Word of God is the *key* that opens the kingdom of God to us. It is the sure way to lead us, the only *guideline* to distinguish between good and evil, and to teach us the true service of God. That Word of God is the *light* that guides us, the *lamp* that illuminates us, the *mirror* in which we see the face of our God. It is the *document of the covenant* that he made with us, in which he by his merciful goodness freely commits himself to be bound to us in this eternal covenant. It is the *only food* for our souls which feeds them until eternal life. It is the tremendous and great task of the church, through the preaching, to proclaim this Word of God, to administer it, and to be insistent. Whenever that Word is devalued, the church disappears. The maxim for the reformer is: without adding to it or taking away from it. Humbly keep silent wherever the Scriptures are silent about the secret wisdom of God. The preaching of God's Word is at the same time the administration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, by the faithful preaching of God's Word in the church, the door of salvation is opened to us. That is why the pure doctrine, the faithful preaching of God's Word, is the real mark of the church. She is the mother in which God conceives us, and who then gives birth to us. Therefore the church can only carry out her duty as a mother by the preaching of the Word. The Word has this function because Jesus Christ, who alone is our life, is given and administered to us through that Word.

We could add many more to these few pronouncements of Calvin. They teach us how important the church is in the life of God's children. They especially teach us how only the church has the right of existence, and the possibility of functioning, when the doctrine taught *there* is in accordance with the Word of God.

The church is not invisible!

It is extremely important that Petrus Datheen in the first question of baptism (later adopted in the first question in the form for profession of faith) spoke expressly about "here in this church" where this doctrine of salvation is being taught.

The church has an actual address, and appears in this world visibly and publicly. The apostle Paul writes his letter primarily to churches which are mentioned by name. And the Lord Christ addresses his letters to the churches of Asia as these congregations are identifiable on the map. So we should not try and hide behind some kind of invisible community when we confess our faith. We do that in a congregation which has an actual address, which has office-bearers, and which possesses the marks of the church.

The church is not an invisible community under the leadership of an invisible God who from an invisible heaven, works in one's heart because of an invisible mystery. No, the church is a distinct community which is fed by the living Word of God. The sheep are there who listen to the voice of the good Shepherd. They listen to this voice because they know the Shepherd, who says: "Follow Me!"

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