

Lesson 21 **THE CHURCH**

21.1 **The Confession of the Church**

The confession concerning the Church is part of our faith, see Article 9, Apostles' Creed. In this confession we must be bound by the teachings of Scripture.

1. The Church Identified (Article 27, Belgic Confession)

The word **Church** as we find it in Scripture means **assembly** or **congregation**, and refers to the covenant people of God, the body of those who are ingrafted into Christ and receive all His benefits. Christ is in heaven and there intercedes for His people, His assembly, wherever they are gathered in the world. The Church is also called the body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 12:27, the bride of Christ, Ephesians 5:25, the household of God, Ephesians 2:20; 1 Timothy 3:5.

2. The Gatherer of the Church (Lord's Day 21, Heidelberg Catechism)

Christ gathers His Church by His Word and Spirit. In the Old Testament, the Church was gathered through central places on earth, and through divinely appointed officers who all foreshadowed the coming Messiah, for example, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Elisha, and so on. Now that the last Office bearer has come, Jesus Christ, the Church is gathered from heaven, and He alone is the Head and foundation of His Church, Galatians 4:26; Philippians 3:20; Ephesians 2:20.

3. The Church Confessed (Article 27, Belgic Confession)

Although we are normally born into the Church and grow up as members of the Church, we may never start out with what we see. First of all, we **confess** the Church. We do not believe **in** the Church, but confess her existence. Faith comes before sight.

Therefore, we must always see the gathering of the Church as a work of Christ. We can always see it, but never in its totality. Sometimes the Church appears as nothing in human eyes; at the same time, we believe it is spread and dispersed over the whole world. Even though we do not know all the world's believers, we confess that we are joined and united with them in the unity of true faith, 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:22, 23.

Each local congregation is also properly called the Church of God, 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Titus 1:5; Philippians 1:1. Normally, we see the Church as the local congregation, and experience the Church in the ties of the local congregation to the federation of Churches, Romans 15:26.

4. The Task of the Church

The Church must proclaim the true message of salvation, and nurture her children in the sound doctrine, Malachi 2:15, 16; 2 Timothy 2:2. The Church must also proclaim the good news of salvation to those who have not heard it before, as well as to those who have become estranged from it, Mark 13:10, Acts 14:16, 17:30. This is the missionary task of the Church, Matthew 28:18-20.

21.2 The Characteristics of the Church

The Church is identified by certain characteristics which are always present with it. Sometimes these characteristics are not readily

seen by human eyes, but they are increasingly seen by the **eye of faith**.

1. The Church is **one**

Unity is a command and norm for the Church of God, 1 Corinthians 1:13; Philippians 2:2; John 17:11. This unity must be visibly manifested. Therefore, we reject the theory of the **pluriformity** of the Church, which states that the one Church of Christ is revealed on earth in different forms or **denominations**. The Church must be one in every way, John 10:16, 17:20; Ephesians 4:4f. Whatever pluriformity is present is due to sin, human weakness, or human limitations.

2. The Church is **holy**

The Church has been set apart by God, and has the calling to live in holiness in the world, Exodus 19:6; Leviticus 19:2. The lives of the members of the Church must be marked by repentance, renewal, and a changed life-style, as Article 29 of the Belgic Confession says. We may no longer live in our sins, but must live to God's service, and to His glory, Romans 12:1, 2; Ephesians 5:25f; 1 Peter 2:9.

3. The Church is **catholic** (universal)

The Church is gathered from the beginning to the end of the world, and spans all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues, Revelation 7:9. In the New Testament dispensation, the division between Jew and Gentile falls away, Ephesians 3:6, 2:15. Therefore, the gospel must be proclaimed to all nations, Matthew 8:11, 28:19; Psalm 2:8. However, the composition of the Church is not determined by number or size,

but by repentance, true faith, and a spiritual obedience leading to growth in piety and godliness, Matthew 24:14, 22.

4. The Church is **apostolic**

The Church is built on the testimony of the apostles and prophets to the work of Christ, Ephesians 2:20f. As eyewitnesses of His glory, the apostles wrote the books of the New Testament, and these are the infallible rule by which the Church must live, Acts 1:22; 2 Peter 1:17, 18. The apostles were instruments of Christ to organize His Church, and they gave infallible directions concerning its institution, organization and government, Matthew 16:18. Today, we must build only on their foundation, 1 Corinthians 3:10f; Titus 1:5.

21.3 **The Gathering of the Church** (Article 28, Belgic Confession)

There is always a two-fold element in the gathering of the Church. Christ gathers us, but we also have the responsibility to obey Him, and gather with Him. He calls us by His Word and Spirit and we must submit to His yoke. The duty and responsibility to submit to Christ's yoke is an obligation that remains with us our whole life long, Luke 9:62, 14:27f.

21.4 **The Marks of the Church** (Article 29, Belgic Confession)

In order to remain faithful to the call of Christ, every believer must know the marks by which the true Church of Christ is known in the world. We must also know the marks by which the false church appears and manifests itself in the world.

1. The True Preaching of the Gospel

The Church of Christ must maintain the sound doctrine, and may not add or take away anything from it, 2 Timothy 1:13, 14, 2:15; 1 Corinthians 4:6. The Church must preach the true doctrine, and may not even tolerate false teaching, Galatians 1:8.

Here the false or unfaithful church not only permits false teachings, but even promotes and endorses them, giving more authority and power to them than the Word of God.

2. The True Administration of the Sacraments

The Church of Christ is called to administer the sacraments according to the institution of Christ, teaching and passing on only the meaning and truth He gives to them, 1 Corinthians 11:29; Romans 6:3f.

Here the unfaithful or apostate church does not administer the sacraments properly, but adds and takes away from them as it sees fit. Here one thinks primarily of the Roman church, although the Anabaptist sects are included as well.

3. The True Exercise of Church Discipline

The Church of Christ is called to maintain the proper discipline over her members, directing all to a life of obedience and holiness in Christ, 1 Corinthians 5:2, 13; Romans 16:17. Church discipline must not be exercised arbitrarily, but according to Christ's command, Matthew 18.

Here the false church sets aside the rules of Scripture, and exercises discipline to the detriment of the truth, and to the hurt of the faithful. Throughout the history of the Church, true believers have

been persecuted and expelled from the church. Through these acts God gives reformation and renewal to the Church.

21.5 **The Marks of Christians** (Article 29, Belgic Confession)

Membership in the Church must never be perceived as an automatic reality, and something that can be taken for granted. There is no room for false security. True believers will then be recognized by the marks of Christians, which are as follows:

- a. a living faith in Jesus Christ, the only Saviour, Acts 4:11, 12
- b. a fleeing from sin, and pursuit of righteousness, Romans 6:2
- c. a firm and constant love of God and the neighbour, 1 John 4:21
- d. a daily putting off of the flesh and its works, Galatians 2:20
- e. a constant courageous struggle against abiding weaknesses, 1 Corinthians 9:26, 27
- f. a constant and daily appeal to the work of Christ for them, 1 Peter 3: 21

Exercises Lesson 21

I. Reference Passages

Memorize: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21.

Study and Review: Belgic Confession, Article 27-29; 16.
Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21,25.
Canons of Dort, I. 1-18; II. 1-9; V. 9.

II. Review Questions

1. What in essence is the Church?
2. From where is the Church gathered? By what means?
3. What are the attributes of the Church? What are the marks? Explain the difference between the **attributes** and the **marks** of the Church.
4. What is our task as members of the Church? Prove your answer.
5. What will happen to the Church in the last days? Will the Church always be present? Prove your answer.

III. Extra Questions

1. Discuss the terms **visible** and **invisible** church. Can we use these terms? Why or why not?

2. What are the marks of the members of the Church? (See Article 29) Who are **not** members of the Church?
3. What are the marks of the false church? Are these marks always present? Are they present in varying degrees?
4. Should there be more than one true Church in a specific place? What does this require and imply?