

III

“IF YOU CONFESS . . .” (Romans 10:9)

THE STRENGTH OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Introduction

Let me begin on a personal note. In the seventies, I found myself in Jerusalem in a library which held valuable treasures related to the situation of the golden city in the fourth century. This was the very thing I wanted, because with a view to my intended thesis, I was searching for data concerning this period, especially in Jerusalem. A kind Roman priest pointed me to various sources and was helpful in my investigation of this era. At one point in the course of conversation, my identity was revealed. I can still see the astonished look in the priest's eyes, and I can still hear his not-less-astonished voice when he said, “A Reformed minister who is interested in the fourth century! The fourth century belongs to us — Catholics!”

You can understand that this was an opportunity for me to assert that the ideas of “Catholic” and “Reformed” are not opposites or mutually exclusive and to deny Rome the privilege of being truly “Catholic” and on the contrary to make this claim for the church which remained in the truth. In this lies the clear starting point I would use as introduction. We speak of the Catholic church as the Apostles' Creed speaks of the “Catholic church” and in the sense of Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism when it states that the Son of God gathers this church out of the whole human race from the beginning to the end of the world.

Catholic

It is interesting to study how people in the fourth century, for example, looked at the words “catholic” or “universal” in relation to the church. In an explanation of the twelve articles given by way of a catechism lesson in 348 A.D., one reads: “The church is called ‘catholic’ because she is spread out over the whole earth from one end to another, and because she teaches universally and completely all which men ought to know concerning things visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; further because she directs the whole human family, rulers and subjects, educated and uneducated, to God; also because she heals and treats every sort of sin committed in body or soul and finally, because she possesses in herself every form of virtue which is revealed as much in deeds as in words and every sort of spiritual gift” (Schaff/Wace, 1952: 139ff.). It is as if this catechism teacher (who was then bishop of Jerusalem) exerted himself to discover every possible meaning of “catholic.” Such a broad definition of the word is not common with writers of that time.

But it is striking that in situations where the church is attacked and slandered, where heretics appear with their own notions, and where many have already turned away from the church, there the word “catholic” appears in one confession after another.

The word is not, however, found only in the Apostles' Creed (which in its earliest form dates from the second century); it also returns in the Confession of Nicea; “I believe one, holy catholic and apostolic church.” That is the text as it was ultimately established at the Council of Constantinople in 381. But the first and foundational text of the first ecumenical Council of 325 also refers to the “catholic church” in its con-

clusion when it speaks of the true deity of the Saviour. In that connection, those who deny the deity of the Saviour are laid under the “anathema” of the “catholic church.”

J. Kamphuis has pointed out that this is, in fact, the concluding point of this confession established by this first ecumenical council. “Let everyone note that it is the catholic church which speaks here. She confesses and she gainsays. She draws the boundaries wide; moved by the mercy of the Son of God, she takes within her boundaries all who await their salvation from Him. But in the midst of all sorts of sects and errors, she draws a clear and sharp line. Also in this she is the catholic church” (Kamphuis, 1980: 785).

High claims

L. Doekes has demonstrated that over against Rome and other religious bodies, the Reformation maintained the high claim that she was the one catholic church. Three examples will suffice. The Augsburg Confession (a Lutheran Confession, 1530) teaches that the one holy church will always remain. This church is the gathering of all believers, a gathering in which the pure Gospel is preached and the true administration of the sacraments maintained (Doekes, 1975: 298).

In the Genevan Catechism, Calvin asks why the church is called catholic. The answer reads: “Because she is one body under one head, so that there is not more than one, but only one church, spread out through the whole world” (Doekes, 1975: 300).

Equally clear is Art. 27 of the Belgic Confession:

We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit. This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man. Thus during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord kept for Himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal. Moreover, this holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.

It is precisely this high claim which the Reformation upheld over against Rome.

Ursinus and Olevianus

The Heidelberg Catechism, then, speaks a very clear language in answer to the question, “What do you believe concerning the holy, catholic, Christian church?” We cite only the first part of the answer:

I believe that the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, by His Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church chosen to everlasting life.

It is instructive to note the explanation which Ursinus (one of the authors of the Catechism) gave of the word “catholic.” He says first of all, that the word “church” here was to be taken in the sense of the whole or catholic multitude of righteous and true believers - from all times, lands and nations, of whom some are now in triumph in heaven, and some still “in warfare” on earth. He then continues: “the word ‘catholic,’ by which the church is named, points mainly to the recognition of all times, nations,

lands and places, on which, from which and in which the congregation is gathered” (Ursinus, 1956: 289 ff.).

Another of the writers of the Catechism, Olevianus, wrote an explanation of the 12 Articles of the faith. He also asks, “Why do you call the church catholic?” The answer reads:

There is only one head of the church, namely Christ. So all believers from Adam to the end of the world are his members and are one body through the Holy Spirit. Through belief in Him, all are saved through one head; they are incorporated into one head, and preserved through one head. So from the beginning, now and always, the Church has had only one way to eternal life; her one head Christ, the only Mediator, who has crushed the head of the Serpent. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus, we believe that we will be saved in the same way as they. Now each believer needs to know for himself all the promises given by God to the whole church and people of God (Olevianus, 1778: 149).

Still a reality

The high claim taken by the Reformation against Rome concerning the one catholic Christian church is still a reality.

In a course, called *The Catholic Religion*, it says that “Rome” is the only church, all other denominations are at a great disadvantage.

“In contrast with these divided groups is the great Christian Church of the world, united about the Pope and the Catholic bishops” (Taylor, 1964: 66).

And if anyone thinks that this claim of Rome has been greatly toned down since the Second Vatican Council (1962), then I point to the “dogmatic constitution” of this Council. Without mincing words, this explanation is given:

This is the one church of Christ which we confess in the Creed to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. After His resurrection, our Saviour entrusted the church to Peter as shepherd. This church, established and built up in this world as a society, one finds in the catholic church governed by the successor of Peter and whose bishops assembled with him, although one can find outside her bosom true and holy members who as the personal gifts of the church of Christ are propelled toward the Catholic unity.”

Now it is true that there are nuances here and there, especially with respect to the “members outside her bosom.” Yet Rome frankly maintains the old claim. Even with all the talk of a new course, it is her concern to hold fast her teaching. The recognition of true and holy member is taken up in one clause. The main sense and intent remains: one finds this church in the catholic church which is governed by the successor of Peter and those bishops assembled with him. This has been clearly pointed out by J. Faber (Faber, 1969: 127).

Catholic belief

The Belgic Confession sets itself very clearly against this when it states that the Catholic Church is not bound to special persons. No, the church characterizes herself as catholic because there is one catholic belief. For example, in the third ecumenical creed, the Athanasian Creed, belief is more than once characterized as “catholic.” I think here especially of the beginning and the end of this confession. The beginning is as follows: “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.” And at the end of this confession there is another

reminder: "This is the catholic faith which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved."

J. Kamphuis, whom we cite with agreement, writes that in the vocabulary of the ancient church, the word "catholic" was given the striking meaning of the catholic church WITH her catholic belief; the church exists through the strength of her catholic belief. Through the centuries, this word has come down to us. In our Christian vocabulary, the word has the same place as with the Christians of the first century. Indeed, we have the same confession as OUR confession. This is expressly stated in the Reformed confession which originated in the 16th century. For instance, Article 9 of the Belgic Confession reads that, "we willingly receive the three creeds, of the Apostles, of Nicea and of Athanasius." Therefore, the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 7 refers to the Apostles' Creed as a summary of "all that is promised to us in the Gospel" and which is necessary for a Christian to believe.

Isn't it striking that in this Lord's Day we come upon the same two intimately connected uses we discovered in the ancient church? The church is called "catholic" here (Q.A. 23) when the apostolic word is recited (Lord's Day 21 further explains and repeats the doctrine of the holy catholic church). But BELIEF also receives the same description of catholicity when the Apostles' Creed is spoken of as "the Articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith." This is language to make us rejoice. It is fortunate that Q.A. 22 does not speak of "the twelve articles," since that number is ultimately arbitrary and of no great significance for our faith. We may rejoice with the apostles' faith not with the twelve articles of apostolic belief. A three-fold division is much more accurate (compare Lord's Day 8). In our catholic faith, we confess belief in the Triune God. The creed breaks into three parts: "The first is about God the Father and our creation; the second about God the Son and our redemption; the third about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification." As the Christian church and by the power of the character and content of our Christian belief, we retain this valuable word from the old Christian church (Kamphuis, 1980: 786).

Transmitted belief

And the old church certainly did not invent that belief! No, she knew that the apostles themselves had taught and transmitted it. The apostle Peter had testified before the Supreme Court that there is only one name by which man can be saved. The apostle Paul pointed out to the Ephesian church that there is only one belief, and one God and Father of all. But this does not only indicate that gifts have been given to the church. It is at the same time an indication of the TASK of the church. For that one catholic belief must be transmitted and passed on. It must be preserved and protected. In the same sense, we read in the letter of our Lord's brother, Jude, when he makes an appeal to "contend for the faith," that the faith was "once for all delivered to the saints." For that faith - for the content and worth of that faith, the church must always contend to the utmost, with every exertion of her powers. It is a valuable possession. It has been delivered. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the holy men of God under the old covenant spoke the word of truth. Christ repeated and elaborated on that word. He spoke the Word of God to the apostles and they in turn passed it on to the inhabitants of Asia Minor, Greece and Italy. The Word was passed on from generation to generation and through ways prepared by God spread through the whole world.

But this is not to say that the church has arrived or has reached a restingplace, as if to say that since the church has the faith, nothing can happen to her now - she has a monopoly on wisdom. No, instead it is a motive and a mandate which must spur

her to the greatest activity and to an intense extreme struggle to preserve this faith and its content and to pass it on.

Pillar and foundation

The apostle writes of these same things in one of his pastoral epistles, in 1 Tim. 3:15. The apostle there characterizes the church as the household of God, the congregation of the living God and as a pillar and bulwark of the truth. A pillar is a column which supports, for example, the roof of a building, and a bulwark (or 'foundation') is something which lies under a building and as a foundation supports a whole building. The last term is, thus, more comprehensive than the first; the church is a column, but even more, it is a foundation. That which is supported is the TRUTH - the gospel of grace.

Roman Catholics have derived the doctrine of the infallibility of the church from this text, but one can find nothing of this idea here. In fact, this text teaches that the truth exists independently from the church. "Bearing of the truth," writes C. Bouma in his explanation of this text, "does not end in an infallible ability to teach truth and error, but it provides a place for the truth in the midst of the world. The words of God are entrusted to the congregation. The congregation must preach that Word and preserve it in purity through confession and life. This is here said by means of the image of the pillar and foundation. This image expresses not a description of the church, but points to her CALLING - in order that she might always fulfill this calling faithfully" (Bouma, 1942: 145).

Calvin also clearly rejects the Roman appeal to this text; "So the papists trifle shamelessly when they conclude from this word of Paul that all their madness must be recognized as the Word of God and that they cannot err because they are the pillar and bulwark of the truth." And then the Reformer continues positively by stating that the church is called a pillar of the truth because the office of the ministry of the word which God has established in her is the only way that truth might be preserved so that it is not lost from the thoughts of the people. The congregation must maintain the truth so that it is preached, preserved pure and uncorrupted and passed on to the next generation.

So far Calvin's "Commentaries." In his "Institutes" he writes; "It is of no small significance that the church is called the pillar and bulwark of the truth and the house of God. With these words, Paul teaches that the church is the trusted custodian of God's truth so that it is not lost in the world; for God has desired to preserve the pure preaching of His Word through the ministry and vigilance of the church, and show himself to us a house-father because He feeds us with spiritual food and cares for everything that is necessary to our salvation" (Calvin, 1960: 1024).

We should note that Calvin speaks here of THE truth; from the context it is clear that he means the full truth of the now sovereign Christ which the church confesses.

Power against might

This preservation of the full truth is the power of the church. But here power stands against might. Where the truth of the Word of God is not preserved and maintained, man may well form a large power-structure, but the church has there lost her power and in fact does not anymore deserve the name CHURCH. This happened to the Roman church; she became a colossal conglomerate. In a similar way, the Reformed Church (Hervormde Kerk, the Dutch State church) became what the missionary H. Kraemer once called a "hotel-church": "birds of a different feather all under one roof

as in a large hotel where everyone has his own room and does his own thing.” In that situation the only common feature is that people live under the same roof. But this has nothing to do with UNITY OF BELIEF, in which the congregation is called the house of God, and comes together as a household, nourished through one Word of truth, sitting at one table and standing at one baptismal font” (Deddens/Drost, 1989: 10).

So the false unity movement of today is not grounded in the unity of belief; rather, with a MINIMUM foundation, people seek to manifest MAXIMUM might and external togetherness. Sooner or later, however, such a building must fall. Whoever wants to erect an enormous skyscraper but gives hardly a thought to the foundation, should not be surprised if after a short while it appears that such a building cannot possibly stand.

False ecumenism

This power of the catholic church needs to be maintained in the face of today’s false ecumenism which does not sufficiently stress the unity of true belief.

In itself, “ecumenical” is a good, Biblical word. It appears approximately 15 times in the New Testament in the sense of the “whole world.” In the Greek word, one also finds root “house”; this implies the reference is to the INHABITED world. Thus, the words catholic and ecumenical have similar meanings. Under the old dispensation, the church was temporarily restricted to one people, Israel. But since Pentecost, Christ again gathers His church from all peoples over the whole world. The exalted Redeemer gathers His catholic or ecumenical church as a church from all times and places.

But the ecumenical spirit, especially as it is embodied in the “Word Council of Churches” (W.C.C.), gives short shrift to the unity of true belief.

I confine myself now to the Assembly of the W.C.C. held at Nairobi in 1975 under the theme “Jesus Christ Liberates and Unites.” One can uncover four basic themes in the thinking of this Assembly.

1. Man can determine out of his own experience who Jesus Christ is, without letting the Scripture have the last word.
2. All men are reconciled to God. In fact, personal belief and conversion are not necessary for salvation.
3. “Liberation” does not, in the first place, refer to sin and guilt, but to oppressive structures.
4. A strong unity of all people is necessary to solve world problems.

This assembly has made it perfectly clear that this world-wide organization is not in the first place concerned with the honour of God, who saves sinners from ruin, nor with preserving the truth of God’s Word, but much more with the well-being of man - man who by means of grandiose projects and through a massive movement of unity is thought capable of providing a better world.

The thinking of the last Assembly of the W.C.C. held in 1983 at Vancouver under the theme “Jesus Christ, the Life of the World” moves in the same direction. Some have thought the W.C.C. is moving in an orthodox direction, but this is to have sand in one’s eyes. It is a modern humanism which continues to set the tone.

Surface unity

In the way the W.C.C. goes further in the direction of horizontality and political power struggles. That which K. Schilder already prophesied in 1948 when the W.C.C. was established now comes to the fore. At that time Schilder stated that this move-

ment would later serve anti-Christian powers. Revelation 17:3 speaks of the false church as an unfaithful woman, a whore sitting on a scarlet beast. That beast means the political world-power which is hostile to God and His service. John sees the beast ridden by the wicked woman; her sitting on the beast means that the unfaithful communion will also strive for the power of this world. The whore who sits on the beast is called, "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations." With this, Scripture wants to make clear the horrible reality that this false communion is apparently ITSELF a part of the godless Babylon of the God-hating world. This is an account of spiritual prostitution and therefore, of unfaithfulness to the Bridegroom of the church. Babylon displays the style of the surface unity which is based on false prophecy and which is dedicated to the glory and the rights of man.

This false prophecy also reveals itself in misuse of God's Word. For example, in the circles of the W.C.C., people often bring up the words from the Saviour's high-priestly prayer of John 17, namely the words "that they may all be one." Some think this unity refers to ALL church communions and even to ALL men. But John 17 actually refers to the unity IN THE TRUTH: "Thy Word is truth." That is a unity of faith and of the contents of faith. A unity above the truth is a human fantasy and only a surface unity.

In the circles of the W.C.C. one also hears the slogan, "Division is sin." But the Saviour said that He came to bring a sword and discord (Mt. 10:34,35), to cast fire on the earth and to bring division (Lk. 12:49,51). This means that the Saviour maintains and sharpens the antithesis - after the pattern of the mother promise of paradise (Gen. 3:15).

The W.C.C. does not want to recognize texts as Is. 52:11, 2 Cor. 6:17 and Rev. 18:4 where the instruction "separate yourself" is given to believers who are in danger of being encircled by a false communion. This command stands in the framework of the antithesis between Christ and Belial, between Jerusalem and Babylon.

It is striking that those associated with the W.C.C. are very tolerant and do not wish to speak of church discipline but at the same time they are very INTOLERANT to those who do not recognize THEIR surface unity. A. Kuyper's words, spoken in 1892 apply here: "He who defends the boundaries of the doctrine is set outside the boundaries of the communion." Man will permit no opposition and no breach of unity. As Rev. 13:15 reveals, man wants standardized thinking; towards those who break this myth of unity, the world is full of hate, just as the Saviour prophesied.

Catholic versus sectarian

The power of the catholic church must also be emphasized with respect to the work of the sects. The word "sect" is derived from the Latin word "sequi" which means "follow." Sectarions follow a limited number of doctrines and tirelessly maintain them whatever the consequences might be. But they do so at the cost of the TOTALITY of the truth and thus they work against the catholic character of the church.

The typical trait of the sects is that their adherents do not see the catholicity of the church and indeed, even reject the undoubted CATHOLIC faith of the church. Because of this, sectarians come to a special exclusivistic knowledge or they speak continually of private views concerning, for example, the 1000-year reign (Millennialism), or of rejection of infant baptism, or of speaking in tongues and miraculous healing (Pentecostalism) or of rejection of the deity of Christ or of the Holy Spirit (Jehovah's Witnesses). But this is of course, inconsistent with the Saviour's injunction to maintain ALL that He had commanded (Matt. 28:19) and a denial of the Apostle Paul's word that doctrine saves (1 Tim. 4:16).

The question may be asked how these one-sided views arise. The answer must be that the sects are characterized by belief in TEXTS rather than belief in SCRIPTURE. People see a particular text and suddenly have no eye for the whole Bible. Often they fail to consider the context and to compare Scripture with Scripture. In a word, they see neither the power of the catholic church nor that of the catholic, universal faith.

The result of this is that people easily fall into BIBLICISM. They swear by a single text and drag out of it what the context shows is not there.

Some have wittily called the sects the “unpaid bills” of the church. Sects often lay their finger on forgotten chapters, and one often finds in them the warmth which is so often missing in the cold, stony orthodoxy of the mainline church.

But be careful with such conclusions! It is the power of the church that she may maintain not one truth, but the WHOLE truth. The whole truth — this cannot be equated with dead orthodoxy or cold inactivity. In response to the charge of dead orthodoxy one can only answer that the truth must not only be CONFESSED but also LIVED.

Evangelical or Reformed

Today, in close connection with the existence of the sects, one often finds the “evangelical” attitude coming to the fore. The word “evangelical” — like so many words in the history of the church — is heavily burdened, because it was and is used in more than one sense. But we deal now especially with the movement which began in the previous century and which wanted to uphold the evangel (gospel) and the Bible, especially in the face of the then rising Bible criticism, but which unfortunately often worked in the manner of Biblicism — stressing certain texts without maintaining the whole Scripture. Because of this, people within the movement often see neither the catholic character of the church nor the catholic character of the church’s doctrine. And this means that people do not see the power of the confession of the doctrine of the church.

C. Trimp has shown that the word “evangelicalism” has a strong American flavour. “It seems,” he writes, “that when the European immigrants set foot in America and began to build up the new American world, the history of the church had a completely new beginning. That new beginning is contemporary with the revivals. So people shorten the historical horizon within which we stand as churches and within THOSE horizons people get to work with great commitment. As a result, the history of God’s covenant through the ages and the history of Christ’s continuing church-gathering work (Lord’s Day 21) does not come into consideration with respect to the beginning of the ambitious undertaking in which the evangelicals are united.”

“We think,” continues Trimp, “that at the moment a strong American influence is at work in the Netherlands. Outside the (reformation of the) church, and her confessional witness, people establish ‘free organizations’ for special purposes like evangelism (Youth for Christ), Christian learning (Evangelical Outreach) and political action. The short-term benefits are obvious. People break through or ignore the difficult and often fossilized church situation in this country and get to work in a quickly secularizing society. One quickly brings together many Christians whose devotion and piety cannot be doubted and so one enjoys harmony outside the walls (of the church). But these ‘free organizations’ only work on the short term. Ignoring history is not only a rejection of the burden of human weakness, it is also a denial of Christ who makes and leads history. The history of the Netherlands is not only a series of human errors. Through the Spirit of Christ, there have also been clear victories of the

faith in our societal life. The one who respects this will perhaps work slower and with less man power but will have more endurance at his disposal. Respect for the ways of the Lord is an important part of the fear of the Lord who is the beginning of wisdom" (Trimp, 1977: 36ff.). We also see the influence of American ideas in Canada.

J. Kamphuis has taken up this thread from C. Trimp and has developed a few thoughts with respect to the term "reformatory" while in a later series of articles entitled "Evangelical or Reformed" he further dealt with several other questions. At the end he comes to this conclusion: "The more radically one falls into the grip of the Reformation, the more strange it will seem to him that the evangelical movement has traded the church for the denomination, Christian confession for special testimony and the Scriptures which testify of Christ for special Biblical themes — strange, not because he personally feels awkward in this climate, but 'strange' because he sees the radicalism of the Gospel disappearing. This is nowhere clearer in my opinion than with respect to the two points which receive new attention in every reformation of the church, namely, the church and the covenant. It is a matter of honour to the God of the Word, who wishes to be the God of our lives, not that we glorify our position, but that we believe that God maintains His norm and continues to ask us whether we have made the most of our talents when He pointed us to a place in the way of the reformation in the CATHOLIC church and also made that known to us. It is the Lord of our life, and also of our study who impresses on us the rule: 'Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more' " (Kamphuis, 1977: 52ff.).

Bible belief vs Bible criticism

Whenever one speaks of the catholic church, he speaks also of the catholic faith. And whoever speaks of the catholic faith, speaks of the whole of Holy Scripture. How the Scripture is and has been attacked! Here looms before us the monster of Bible criticism in its many forms. Bible criticism is a sort of approximation of the Scripture in which it is not received in its ENTIRETY as the infallible and trustworthy Word of God, but in which only certain limited parts are recognized as trustworthy.

One thinks here not only of the freethinkers who have always made attempts to strengthen their position by means of supposed contradictions or so-called "doublets" in the Bible and who in the free-thinking way have retained practically nothing of the Holy Scripture. Nor does one think only of the "ethical" school of thought which instead of saying, "God's Word is the Bible" came with the view "God's Word is in the Bible." (This latter view, in a particular form, was later adopted and developed by Karl Barth.) One also thinks here of a whole list of theologians, or, better, philosophers, who brought salvation-facts from the Bible into doubt, who explained historical passages as myth and who stressed the "time-bound" character of the books of the Bible. One could hear the explanation that a distinction must be made between the "packaging" and the "message" — and the latter was that which is of significance to us, it was said. The THEOLOGIAN would then make clear where the "packaging" ended and the kernel began. H.M. Kuitert once said of this distinction between "packaging" and message: "Whoever does not distinguish between these two, moves away from the intent of the Scriptures and compels the congregation to understand being a Christian as accepting a number of outdated propositions" (Kuitert, 1970: 44).

There also arose the concept of "relational truth"; the truth of God exists "in relation." By this is not meant the great wonder that God through revelation and proclamation of His truth linked Himself to man. "No," as M.K. Drost writes, "one is concerned here with the origin, the source and the character of God's truth. It emanates from

“God and Co.” as someone has pithily expressed it in a critical analysis of the Report (the Report of the Synodical church concerning the nature of Biblical authority, K.D.). The truth of God never exists apart from us” (Drost, 1982: 18).

It is needless to say that the strength of the catholic church is systematically attacked through the many forms of Bible criticism which have existed and do exist. Yet, to stand for the infallible and trustworthy Word of God — that remains the strength of the catholic church.

“Now we must live” — so K. Schilder in the thirties ended his reigning summons in “Ons Aller Moeder” — out of the revealed Word. Well then, as the revealed Word says: Repent! and do so immediately and in covenant obedience” (Schilder, 1935: 97).

Is it not basically a matter of obedience to the indivisible Word of God as the truth which leaves not a single doubt and which is the rich possession of faith in God’s catholic church?

Confessed and Experienced

A while ago we said that the catholic faith needs not only to be confessed but also to be experienced. Now that we come to the end of our discussion, we would like to once again clearly underline this point. It is by the unspeakable grace of God that He still goes on gathering His church in this land — a church chosen to everlasting life. This candle could have been taken away a long time ago.

We do not know how long the candle will remain in Canada. We shall not speculate on the church’s chance of survival. But thankfulness that the Lord Jesus still goes on gathering His congregation must never allow us to forget the call to confess and to live the truth of God’s Word.

A dreadful secularism grows all around us. Sects rise as mushrooms from the ground. All sorts of movements overwhelm thousands. Has the church had her day? Must we take refuge in a weakened confession and add water to the wine?

There is only one answer. We must show our gratitude for the strength of the catholic church by not being indifferent or introverted ourselves. Not, indifferent, as if we more or less stand outside the church. Do we not personally confess that we are and forever shall remain a living member of this church? And not indifferent, inward-directed, as if the power was not a dynamic reality. We have a message for the world! Not a partial Gospel, not a weakened confession but a word from the catholic church, a word charged with power and radiating strongly to the outside — because it is the catholic belief which touches ALL:

We have a word for the world.

We have a word for the modern man.

We have a word for the wandering.

We have a word for the young person, also in the church.

For we have the Word of truth, which is the gospel of our salvation!

(Ephesians 1:13)

FUNCTION OF THE BELGIC CONFESSION

Adopted by the Church

In 1561 Guido de Brès had completed a booklet in which he had shown as clearly as possible that the Calvinists had nothing to do with the Baptists (Wederdopers) and in which he had made manifest their desire to go the legal way. This was the booklet

that later would enter into history as the Belgic Confession. De Brès had given it to the theologian Savaria, later Professor at Leiden when the latter stayed in the Netherlands for a few months.

It also had obtained a certain approval from the Church because the congregation of Antwerp had shown its unconditional agreement with it (De Pater, 1950: 9).

But not as many as fifty years later the **Remonstrants** would rear their heads.

One of their spokesmen, Wtenboogaert writes: At first the Reformed did not even have their own creed but they simply lined up behind the Augsburg creed, the confession of the Lutherans, because this was the most simple thing for them to do. But at that time, so he tells, a booklet was published in the Netherlands, entitled "Confession of faith of all believers, scattered across the Netherlands, who wish to live in accordance with the purity of the Gospel, containing thirty-seven articles." This creed, he says, did not only disagree with the Romans and Baptists, but also with the Lutherans. Actually it is only a translation of the French Confession. And if this creed has obtained a certain place in the churches it is in no way legally entitled to that place. "I do not find," he writes literally, "that any synodical or other general assembly of all churches in the Netherlands previously has been held to that end or that a general order thereto has been given by them all and even less so that it originally would have been tested and thoroughly examined by them all and that it, according to the Word of God and with full knowledge of the facts, would have been adopted by them all."

How much is true of this story of Wtenboogaert? Is it true that the confession never had been tested and adopted by a general synod? We wish to say at once: NOT A WORD of Wtenboogaert's stories is reliable! It is out of the question that the Belgic Confession only is a translation of the French one. The Belgic Confession deals briefly with some points, the French one extensively, with other matters it is just the reverse. The numbering is not the same. Moreover the French confession has 40 articles, the Belgic has 37. Already we mentioned the fact that the Congregation of Antwerp, in the year 1561, the year the Belgic Confession was written, had adopted it. It was spoken about at that time, probably for that reason, as the "Confession d'Anvers," i.e., the Confession of Antwerp. Besides, de Brès had written in the letter that accompanied the Confession when he delivered it to the Commissioners in the night of November 2nd, that he spoke "on behalf of the citizenry of the city" (the city of Doornik), that he presented to them the confession as made "with general accord" of more than half of the citizens, and even that he knew to speak on behalf of over 100,000 believers in the country. It is clear from it all that Guido de Brès most certainly had consulted with others, and that right from the start, the confession had been adopted by the church.

The remarkable point is exactly that in that time of persecution, when it was extremely difficult to hold an ecclesiastical meeting, the Belgic Confession nevertheless has been brought into discussion right from the beginning, as soon as a possibility to meet arose. In 1563, therefore even during Guido de Brès' life a provincial synod was held at Armentieres in French Flanders. In this meeting already the regulation was made that the confession which has been adopted among us, should be subscribed by elders and deacons. This course of action has also been followed by other provincial synods in the Southern Netherlands. On the Synod held in June of the year 1565, called the Pentecostal Synod, the confession was spoken of as "the creed of the Churches in this country." On this synod it was namely agreed that at the beginning of every synod reading of the confession of the churches in this country should take place (Bakhuizen van den Brink, 1976: 17; cf. Vonk, 1955: 106 ff.).

Testify agreement

In 1568 a convent was held in Wesel, where it was decided that ministers of the Word before being installed in their service, should testify their agreement with the doctrine which was contained in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. In 1571 a synod of deputies from the Dutch churches was held in Emden where the following decision was made: "In order to prove the concord among the Dutch Churches concerning the confession, the brethren thought it proper to subscribe to the confession of faith of the Dutch Churches." Noteworthy is also the decision of the Classis Walcheren in 1574: "We believe and acknowledge hereby that every portion of the aforementioned confession of faith of the Christian congregation of the Netherlands is in accordance with the Word of God and we therefore promise to conform our doctrine and church service to it."

Therefore there is not a word true of Wtenboogaert's pretention that no ecclesiastical assembly had adopted the confession. The very facts contradict this pretention. It is exactly from the side of the Remonstrants, that RESISTANCE against the confession arose. Wtenboogaert thought it a form of inquisition when one had to subscribe to the confession again. The Remonstrant minister Duifhuis spoke mockingly of the Belgic Confession as the "measuring cord" (het meetkooordeken). "It was not right," as it was said by the Remonstrant-inclined classis of Nijmegen, "to burden brethren with repetition of the confession." Professor Polman remarks in this connection: Where the tie to the confession loosens and secretly all sorts of deviations are nurtured, such sort of legalistic reasoning arises, and this is very instructive, because the accusation of legalism and sticking to the letter of the law is usually started vice versa. Then the subscription to the confession does not become a repetition of the confession of the heart, but the humiliating creeping through a narrow gate in order to get access, an act, when once inside, one wishes to forget as soon as possible and not to repeat.

In those days, full of tension when the Remonstrant errors took shape, the church in our native country became mobile everywhere. Her precious heritage was threatened. She did not wish to admit preaching on her pulpits that would disturb the concord in the pure sound doctrine, as laid down in her Confession and Catechism. She would not suffer the seed of the church to be instructed by false teachers. She asked guarantees out of necessity imposed upon her.

Therefore clearly edited subscription forms came into use. Formerly one simply set his signature under the confession, but that would not suffice for the church any longer. The sense of the subscription was to be described extensively. Rev. Arnold Cornelii of Delft held secret meetings in 1605 with other ministers in order to get major assemblies to decide for the banning of all corruption of the doctrine, that "those who are freshly accepted in the service, not simply subscribe to the Catechism and 37 articles, but besides, that they by setting their own signature declare that, if they get to dispute any point of the doctrine contained in them, they will be deposed of their service and promise to renounce it." He got his wish.

Subscription form

Numerous regional synods drew up a subscription form for their district. At last in the National Synod of Dort 1619 the well-known subscription form is made up, which contains the following elements:

1. A clear declaration that the doctrine of the Free Forms of Unity in every respect is conform to the Word of God;

2. The solemn promise to teach this doctrine and to faithfully promote it and reject, refute, and resist all errors in contradiction with it, without teaching or writing openly or secretly, directly or indirectly anything against it;
3. The clear promise that if one would conceive any thought or feeling against the aforesaid doctrine or any point of it, this never will be openly or secretly presented, promoted or written, but first it will be submitted to the classis or synod, for examination;
4. At last the promise, if consistory, classis or synod by important reasons of thought would deem it proper to demand more explicit feeling and explanation, to be willing to give it, on penalty of immediate suspension from the service.

This form speaks for itself. Here the binding to the confession is effected as strongly as possible. In the high consciousness of her calling the church, guarding the doctrine and along with it the words of God, entrusted to her, imposes this great obligation and her office-bearers accept it and willingly make this vow, because they wholeheartedly feel and believe that this doctrine in everything is in conformity with the Word of God. The concord in the doctrine, the well-being of the church, the seriousness of every heresy, the right to submit objections, fully justify for them the demand of subscription to the confession.

“Dordrecht chains”

The church would have stayed out of much trouble if every office-bearer would have stuck to these sound rules for the churches' federate life contained in the subscription form of Dort, and the churches themselves would not have put up their own regulations for bargaining. Formally this sound rule remained in existence until 1816. Practically it had become a dead rule for many already in the 18th century. It is one of the first acts of the state created by King William I, when by the synodical Board of the Reformed Denomination the old subscription form is so modified that one “in good faith accepts and heartily believes the doctrine, which according to the Holy Word of God, is contained in the adopted Forms of Unity of the ‘Nederlands Hervormde Kerk.’ ”

Scorn was heaped upon Rev. Molenaar and Rev. Schotsman when they called this new form a trap, and against Bilderdijk who took sides with them; a storm of indignation broke loose.

Donker Curtius later unscrupulously declared that by “according to” was meant: “as far as.” Everybody could therefore make out for himself in how far this accordance was under discussion, people dared to speak of “most miserable forms” and “Dordrecht chains.”

In 1854 the subscription form was modified again and one could suffice by declaring “that we wish and want to faithfully maintain the spirit and essence of the doctrine which is contained in the adopted forms of unity of the ‘Nederlands Hervormde Kerk.’ ”

Things become more stretchable yet in 1888: “We promise in deep awareness of our calling and in confidence in God, that we diligently and faithfully will be working in it and, according to the principles and the character of the ‘Nederlands Hervormde Kerk’ in this country, will preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, and promote to the best of our ability the interests of the Divine Empire and accordingly those of the ‘Nederlands Hervormde Kerk,’ in obedience to her regulations.”

Here the Forms of Unity are not mentioned at all any more. The lawlessness in the doctrine has made a perfect triumph. The confession had been pushed aside. The

tie to the confession has been cut. The un-Christian tolerance has triumphed. It is true that Article 11 still speaks of maintaining the doctrine, but numerous synodical verdicts shed a sharp light on what was understood by it.

To give a single example, the classes Alkmaar and Deventer pleaded in addresses to the synod of 1874 for deletion of this article, because maintaining it in the present situation was impossible, and meant untruth and mystification, since general deviation from the old doctrine had taken place.

The reporting committee fully agreed with this.

“The disputed words (maintaining the doctrine) tempt to self-deceit, to shameful injustice, to widening of the split between the various religious currents in our church; they can chase from heads and hearts the interest in the development of God-devoted feeling and willing of the mind according to the Word and the Spirit of Christ.” Discipline of doctrine would mean: “the inevitable shattering and doom of our church. All those who do not really and unconditionally agree with the doctrine contained in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of the Dort Synod, the modern, the evangelicals and also the majority of the orthodox are then banned from the ‘Hervormde Kerk’ by those who in their conscience can find the liberty of maintaining the doctrine.”

Every shadow of discipline of the doctrine was to be avoided and therefore the committee proposed to establish: “Since the doctrine contained in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of the Synod of Dort, these historic foundations of the ‘Nederlands Hervormde Kerk’ is no longer confessed by the congregation with sufficient accord as being the expression of her Christian belief, the duty of maintaining this doctrine cannot be imposed upon the governors of the church any longer, as it was done formerly. While the congregation developing itself on the principles of the ‘Hervormde Kerk’ as the latter appear to be in their origin and development, goes on shaping a way of expression for her Christian belief which once may again give rise to a confession of the ‘Nederlands Hervormde Kerk,’ pronounced with sufficient accord, nobody may in the meantime be banned from the church as a member or a teacher, who complying with the remaining compulsory requirements, is convinced in his conscience that he, according to the principles of the ‘Nederlands Hervormde Kerk,’ may belong to her.”

The synod adopted this proposal, but for secondary reasons the said article was not deleted. The synod in 1978 did state: “Further, as far as the word ‘maintain’ is concerned, this can impossibly mean: take care, if need be, by means of canon law enforcement, that nothing be changed in it, because growth of religious knowledge follows immediately, which presumes development as mentioned and therefore tolerates different appreciation of the Gospel truth.”

The lesson for today

In the meantime in the nineteenth century — this is the crying misery and the terrible consequence of this attitude of the church, which is supposed to be the pillar and foundation of the truth — people are surrendered to rationalists, freemasons, liberals, socialists and numerous other evil currents. In her midst acted office-bearers who unpunishedly denied the basic truths, rejected God’s Word, definitely denied the Divine Sonship of Christ, mocked the blood theory (as some still do today), replaced baptizing in the name of the Triune God with baptizing in liberty, equality and fraternity. The congregation suffered under this “dominocracy” (ministers’ rule) and the ministers without a backbone became slaves of the cherished images of leading groups.

This lesson of the nineteenth century has stronger than ever convinced the Reformed people of the correctness of the point of view of the Dort Fathers wherever it concerned maintaining the confession. It is noteworthy therefore that already on the first synod of the Christian Seceded Church in Amsterdam the old subscription form of Dort was introduced again and the same thing is true of the “Dolerende Kerken.” Both returned to the sound church order and followed the good track of the Dort Fathers in the matter of the binding to the confession, a track that had been left at an ill hour.

This lesson may never be forgotten!

CONFESSION AND SCHOOL

Some theses

In what follows these eight theses are worked out:

1. The confession does not deal only with ecclesiastical life, but has to function in the whole life of Christians.

2. The consequence of this function of the confession is that the schools to which we send our children, must have their own Reformed character.

3. To provide for Reformed schools means much more than to respect the tradition of ancestors: we must have the same faith and the same consciousness of a calling.

4. To maintain the confession with respect to the school means to maintain that we confess our faith in our triune God, as stated at the baptism of our children.

5. According to Lord's Day 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism we have to confess God the Father and our creation, God the Son and our redemption, and God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification.

6. This confession means in the first place that our children have to learn to live to the honour and praise of the Name of God the Father.

7. Furthermore, this confession means that our children are set apart as children of God's covenant, being bought by the Mediator of God's covenant, our Lord Jesus Christ.

8. Finally, this confession means that our children are governed by the Holy Spirit, that they may be nurtured in the Christian faith and in godliness.

Function

To say that our confessions only deal with ecclesiastical life shows a lamentable misunderstanding. Some people have the opinion: in the *church* we are bound to the confession, but in our common daily life we are free from it. When we think in this manner, we create a contrast. However, we are bound to our confessions not only on Sunday, but on Monday as well. We are bound not only in ecclesiastical life as members of the church, but also in daily life as members of society.

It does not need proof that we are bound to the law of our heavenly Father every day and every hour of our life. We also know that the obedience to this law is the true freedom for God's children. God's law is *universal* and deals with our whole life. In the same way we can say: what we confess as Christians is universal and has to do with our whole life. There is not a so-called *neutral* territory, in which we are allowed to follow our own desires and to feel free from God's law.

Consequence

When we say that there is no neutral zone it becomes obvious that this has also consequences with respect to school life. Such a consequence of this universal function of our confession is that — to the utmost of our power — the schools to which we send our children must have their own Reformed character. We are not able yet to establish a Canadian Reformed College or University. However, we have the calling to establish schools for our children with their own Reformed character, on the basis of our confessions as much as we can. That is not a matter of a kind of *hobby* of some enthusiastic people, but that is the precious calling of Reformed believers, who profess their faith by words and deeds.

Respect

It remains necessary to emphasize this our duty and calling with respect to establishing schools for our children. For it is possible that we still have a certain feeling of *alliance* with that which has grown in the course of history and which has been given to us by a previous generation. There can be a kind of respect for tradition, and a kind of piety. This has, of course, a certain value. However, when this piety is not motivated by an awareness of calling, it becomes a worldly matter. This danger can threaten us also with regard to our Reformed schools. We know that a previous generation struggled hard for these schools; so we can feel obliged to maintain them and to give our money for them, while we do so out of *tradition*. This would not be good. We should maintain our oneness in faith with the previous generation. We should retain the same awareness of calling as our fathers had. If that faith is not there anymore, then we can inherit the books with the minutes and the buildings, we can preserve them respectfully and carefully, but we would have lost that inheritance as a work of faith. So it remains very important to see the school in the first place as a matter of faith. This implies that we must act on the basis of the same confession.

No confessionalism

If we stress that the confessions really are to function in our schools and that we must have the same contents of faith as our ancestors had, that does not mean that we want to *overestimate* the confession. This would be a kind of *confessionalism*. In such a case we would not do justice to the unique dominion of God's Word. A confession can only have a derived certainty, derived from the original certainty of Holy Scripture.

But we must say at the same time: if there is room and a calling for having a scriptural confession, then this confession may not be made suspect.

No biblicism

When we say: we should not go in the direction of confessionalism, we must add: neither in the direction of *biblicism*. It was a slogan of the Arminians: only the Bible! If the Arminians were correct then it would be possible to attach a function to the Bible which the Bible does not have. It would place the Word of God outside the reality of life, namely, outside the reality of church-life in her age-long struggle to guard and to keep what had been entrusted to her.

Exactly because of the character of the confession as *confession*, which is based on the Word of God, we may not abandon it, as long as the confession is not disproved

with clear and firm arguments from God's Word. Even in that case we may not say farewell to the confession, but we have to go the ecclesiastical way. Therefore on the one hand there should be no overestimation of the confession, but on the other hand no *underestimation* either.

No dead formula

The confession may never function like a dead formula. That is what *Calvin* said when he stressed that the confession always has to function as a spiritual guide. He writes: "We have to esteem the confession highly. Indeed, the confession is a human writing. But the contents and the ornament of it are derived from the prophets and the apostles."

Calvin put emphasis on that fact that the confession may never become a dead formula. Just three hundred years after Calvin's death *Groen van Prinsterer* said the same in connection with the State Church in the Netherlands: "The confession of the Church has to be respected above every form of the Church and every regulation, and no stipulation may be considered as binding which could be an obstacle on the way of maintaining the confession of the Church."

No limitation

However, there was the tendency to place *limitations* on the confession, especially in the sense that people would not be bound by the whole confession in each and every activity or situation. One would like to have a special confession for mission, for politics and also for education.

J. Faber pointed to the fact that there is a tendency in the U.S.A. and in Canada to exchange the Reformed Creeds and confessions in the constitution of the school societies for an educational creed.

He gave an example of a so-called educational creed formulated in Toronto, which speaks about life, Scripture, Christ, reality, knowledge, scholarship, and academic freedom. He said: what is good in this statement is found in broader and better form in the Reformed confessions, and he concludes: "Whoever studies the samples of educational summaries of principles offered during the last decades and compares them with the contents of the creeds and confessions must conclude that, if in school communities they are to replace the historic confessional documents of the Reformed churches, they will impoverish Christian life and action" (Faber, 1982: 5). In fact, what J. Faber warns against is a limitation of the confessions. We must be aware of the danger of going in that direction!

Relevant

The background of such a desire for educational confessions or creeds can be that one has the idea that the confessions are not *relevant* to school life, or that one is not able to apply the Reformed creeds and confessions to the education of the children. However, consider this: what did the parents promise at the baptismal font with respect to the education of their children? It is very clear. The third and last question directed to the parents of the children of God's covenant is: "Do you promise as father and mother to instruct your child in this doctrine (that is the doctrine of the Old and New Testament, summarized in the confessions, as the true and complete doctrine of salvation), and to have him (or her) instructed therein to the utmost of your power?" When the parents answer in the affirmative, the children are baptized into the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. From this baptism formula

we can see right away what the *content* of our confession is. It is clearly stated in Lord's Day 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith profess God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, into whose name the children are baptized. So the three parts of our confession are about God the Father and our creation, about God the Son and our redemption, and about God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. Are these three parts not relevant to our schools and to the education of our children?

Very important and still relevant is what the late B. Holwerda said about the matter of school education in a speech held in 1941 and printed in one of the books, published after his death. I will give extensive quotations.

God the Father and our creation

God the Father and our creation: that is the first article of our confession that is also the beginning of our school. We are saying here: "The earth is the LORD's and the fulness thereof." If we do not see this, we do not understand anything of the school with the Bible. . . . The school with the Bible is something other than a school plus a Bible. It is something other than a school with some education in religion. The school is not a school with the Bible if just a psalm is to be learned, or the history of the Bible is told to the children; but a school is truly a school with the Bible, when all of the education is ruled by the Scriptures; when each and every subject is ruled by the confession of God the Father and our creation (Holwerda, 1958: 91ff.).

Holwerda continued to say (in 1941):

It is still quite strongly so that for many among us the characteristic distinction between the Christian and the public schools is seen in a Bible story, in a stanza of a psalm and in prayer, while the other subjects are considered as being neutral. We have so little defense against the well-known remarks from public school supporters, that our speaking of counting and writing in a Christian way is actually nonsense. Outsiders say: "Also for your children two times two is four, precisely as at the public school. They get the same results as others in adding and subtracting, in multiplying and dividing. Of course, if two times two for Christian children would be five, then we could see a good reason for a Christian school; but not now." Outsiders say: "When your children learn to write, they do this in the beginning in just as clumsy a fashion. When they start reading, they stutter in the beginning, and drone with the same tone as at the public schools. In history they learn the same dates; in geography they study the same map. Are not all these subjects neutral?" Do we have only little defense over against such reasoning? Are we aware that in this way the Christian character of the entire education is actually attacked, and that by such contemplations the whole Christian life is fundamentally undermined?

Holwerda writes, in the war situation:

Many parents are happy when their children are able to learn well: such children have later, when they have finished school, a good possibility to make a decent living; then they can nicely find their way through life; add to this some knowledge of the Bible and all will be fine for eternity as well. However, in this way life as a whole is secularized. For such Christian parents consider a good school a vehicle for a good position.

Should we not agree that these words of Holwerda are still relevant? He refers to *Psalms* 8, calling this the psalm which Jesus Christ had in mind, as often as He thought about little children.

This poet says: "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Thy name in all the earth!" Why is that name majestic here on earth? It is because among other things, "by the mouth of babes and infants, Thou hast founded a bulwark because of Thy foes, to still the enemy and the avenger." He considers the mouth of a child, the chatter even of babes, a tremendous instrument, by which God breaks here on earth the dominion of the evil one, by which He builds His kingdom, and reconquers the world for Himself. We are inclined to say: that is somewhat overdone. The dominion of Satan stands firmly and it is surely not blown down by mouths of children. But that poet is confident and he knows what he says. He enjoys the crying of a baby who is born. He does not do that because that mouth will sing psalms later on, and will say prayers. Of course, that is also important. He is doing this because this child is also chosen by God to royal dominion. Also to this child God paid attention as a son of man, and also this child is crowned with glory and honour in order to have dominion presently over the works of God's hands. He knows very well that not each and every boy is a born minister. Most of them will be busy in the country or in the city in other jobs. But these sons of man will have their occupation as servants of God and in their business the name of the LORD will be glorious over all the earth. That is the expectation of this poet: not that these children will have a good *job*, but that they will become *God-fearing* farmers and labourers; that they will keep in their business and in their job the commandments of the LORD; that they in their own place will repel the enemy and the avenger, and that they will conquer the rebellion against God (Holwerda, 1958: 93ff.).

The majesty of God's name

Do we see the significance of our Reformed schools? Holwerda says further:

Of course, two times two is four, also in our schools. But our children have to know that, not because they must presently be able businessmen, but in order to sanctify their business "for the LORD."

Covenant children learn the same letters as other children, and when they begin to use a pen and ink, they make the same stains as the others do. But by the young brains, by the mouths, by the little fists of our children, God has founded a *bulwark* because of His foes, in order that His name will be glorious on earth. If that were not the case, then do not teach them at all. If your boys only have to count in order to advance in life and surpass father and mother, then do not teach them and do not let them be taught. Then life will be profaned and desecrated, and this child will become a tool of the enemy and the avenger.

Instead they learn to count and they learn to read because of God's foes. The LORD, whose glory is above the heavens, is on the way to His glorious kingdom on earth also in the scratching pens of our children.

Holwerda goes on:

A recruit does not learn to handle weapons without purpose. He is learning this in order to be able to fight on behalf of his king, and his fatherland. If he isolates it from that purpose, he is engaging in crime.

So it is with our schools. Our children do not learn to read and to count as if education were an end in itself. Geography and history are not subjects which are to be considered apart from God. Children can only work with them either for or against God. There is not a third way. For the earth is the LORD's and the fulness thereof. The children will serve God in the world and will give thanks to Him. If they are not doing that, and if they do not learn to do that, then God will give them over to a wrong mind, because they have not honoured or thanked Him; then in

their thoughts and deliberations they will come to vanity and their unwise heart will have become darkened.

Holwerda says to the parents:

This is your calling regarding the school with the Bible: that you see and confess things in this way: that you say: my children shall be educated in the service of God for their whole life; and in no other way; that you maintain it and stand for it, whatever the consequences are: my children are for the honour and the Name of the LORD. For nothing else. You do not send them to the school because they have to know how they have to go through their life and how they can go to heaven, but in order that God's name will be glorified in all the earth. If the sole purpose of education would be to make them skilled for life and nothing more, then it would be alright to let them go to a public school. If it is desirable that they know something about religion, well, then the church and the catechism class are there. But if you say: the earth is the LORD's then you say: now never any other school, but only the school with the Bible. For us, that is the school which maintains the Reformed confession. Not all of them will become ministers of the church — a good thing too! — but presently they have to know on the farm, in the shop, in the factory, in the kitchen and in the garage how to serve the LORD.

B. Holwerda added:

I wish that this motive of the great enmity would dominate us again; that we would see it again that in our whole life here on earth, in all its aspects, the name of the LORD must be hallowed; then we would know again what Christian education actually is, and we would again stand behind it. Then we would again be immovable as our fathers were: here we stand, we cannot do otherwise. For the name of the LORD on the earth! For anything else we never will give our children! (Holwerda, 1958: 95 ff.).

God the Son and our redemption

We listened to B. Holwerda telling us that as we educate our children there can be no question as to how we have to consider the work of God our Father. There may be no uncertainty with respect to the goal of the education of our children: that the name of the Father may be glorious in all the earth.

Holwerda goes on to speak about the relevance of the confession about God the Son and our redemption in the education of our children. There should not be any uncertainty with respect to the position of our children in this world, thanks to the work of *God the Son*.

For there is the reality of God's covenant. There is the immovable firmness of God's *promise*, that our children are washed in the blood of Jesus Christ.

I quote in this respect the Form for the Baptism of Infants: "When we are baptized into the Name of the Son, God the Son promises us that He washes us in His blood from all our sins and unites us with Him in His death and resurrection."

Holwerda goes on to say:

If we lose sight of this even for one moment, then our children have become baptized heathens, maybe with a somewhat greater chance for salvation because they are more in contact with God's grace. However, then our schools with the Bible have lost their significance because we would have erased the radical difference between our children and the children of unbelievers. . . ." (Holwerda, 1958: 97). Holwerda stressed that not we, as Christian parents, ourselves, but that the LORD makes the distinction. If we had our Reformed schools only with the intention to create a distinction on our own authority, we would not have a leg to stand on. Saying, the

schools are good for bringing the children to Jesus Christ, then we do not see things right. Then the unbelievers are right, saying that Reformed education is a disrupting influence. You know the reproaches of unbelievers, stating that we sow divisions in the nation: we break the national unity. But we reply: the *LORD Himself* made the distinction, already in the baptism of our children. The fellowship of blood and place and time is broken by God Himself where He established the antithesis of His covenant.

In line with B. Holwerda we say: This we have to maintain over against everyone who wants to say it differently. If we tried to dissolve the antithesis by a so-called unity, we would commit a crime over against outsiders. But now we have Reformed schools which maintain the confession because God Himself made the distinction in His covenant. "This is the second pillar upon which the Reformed schools stand: the covenant of the LORD as a great and deep reality."

Therefore, in the first place, we see the connection between God's Word with the confession based on it and the school because "the *cosmos* cannot be broken: the earth is the LORD's and the fulness thereof." But, secondly, we also want the connection between Bible with confession and the school because there is *indeed* a split in mankind. This God, to whom the whole world belongs, makes a distinction, an antithesis, in Christ Jesus. Our children are set apart by Him as children of God's covenant, being bought by the Mediator of God's covenant, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Of course, also with respect to our children we confess that they are conceived and born in sin, and therefore subject to all sorts of misery, even to condemnation. But in the same breath we also confess that our children are sanctified in Christ and thus as members of His church ought to be baptized. With that we confess that God Himself in Christ Jesus made the distinction with His covenant.

God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification

Holwerda then writes about the third part of our confession: God the *Holy Spirit* and our sanctification. Let me first quote again from our beautiful Form for the Baptism of Infants. "When we are baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal." Holwerda points to the prayer of thanksgiving after baptism where the church prays to God: "We pray Thee through Thy beloved Son that Thou wilt always govern this child by Thy Holy Spirit, that he (or she) may be nurtured in the Christian faith and in godliness, and may grow and increase in the Lord Jesus Christ." Holwerda adds:

The church professed the Holy Spirit as the sovereign Worker [of grace], as the great Governor of her children: God the *Holy Spirit* is working, not men. But the church also professed the Holy Spirit as her God who in His good pleasure, chooses His instruments, and who wants to govern the children of the covenant by the means, provided by Himself: the educational office of the parents. He also grants the freedom to make use of others in the education of the children, but He never allows them to pass that office to others or to have others take away that office from them.

The Holy Spirit has said to the parents [in the baptism of the children of God's covenant]: it is I who govern your children, but it pleased Me to do that via your education. He has bound them to this, to His sovereign decree.

Therefore, as Reformed people we are called to establish Reformed schools, being

parents of God's covenant children. This is not a *right* of ours, but it is the consequence of the *rightful claim of God the Holy Spirit* on the children of the covenant. Therefore this confession means that we believe that the Holy Spirit promised: "I am the One to rule over your children, but it pleased Me to do that through your education." Therefore, the Holy Spirit wants the children of the covenant to be nurtured in the Christian faith and in godliness (Holwerda, 1958: 101).

Called by God Himself

Holwerda concludes with this summary:

I believe in God the Father, the Creator; this means: I believe that if I am faithful and acknowledge His claim on my whole life, He Himself will take care that the whole earth will be filled with His glory. Maybe I do not see the results, but I trust in Him: He will do it.

I believe in God the Son, the Redeemer; this means: I believe that if I accept obediently the antithesis also with respect to the education [of the children], He Himself will realize and maintain this antithesis; . . . that He Himself casts fire upon the earth and is bringing the discord among men [namely, between faith and unbelief]

I believe in God the Holy Spirit who sanctifies; this means: I believe that, certainly, the rights of the parents in the school can be denied [e.g., by a government], but that never the calling by the Holy Spirit can become undone. When I remain faithful on the post where He put me, the situation can become frightening for me [1941: Hitler's occupation] and I can be attacked from several sides, but the Spirit will maintain His calling [for me] also over against those who attack it. Perhaps I cannot do this, but *He* will.

Therefore, we go on working, offering, praying for schools with the Bible [i.e., Reformed schools where the Bible rules over, and the confession is maintained in the entire education of our children, K.D.]. Perhaps, the time is coming when we are only able to pray. But even then we are not beaten. For God, who, in the end, will let the world perish upon the prayer of His church, will, upon the prayer for the hallowing of His Name, create the new world also in and through the [faithful Christian] school. It may not look that way at all at the present moment, but that new world will come, also via our faithfulness to the school with the Bible [and the Reformed Confession, K.D.]: O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is thy Name in all the earth (Holwerda, 1958: 102).

Let us not forget this urgent appeal of Holwerda.

Halloween

"Hallowing" — brings me to the name *Halloween*, the feast that is celebrated on October 31. This feast goes back to a practice of the ancient Druids in Britain and France, the Celtic tribes who lived hundreds of years before Christ was born. This celebration honoured one of their gods, namely, the *Lord of the Dead*. The date for the celebration was the last day of October, the eve of the Celtic new year. At that occasion the people needed much food, because the souls of the dead returned to their former homes. It was a big feast.

The church of the early Middle Ages wanted to *accommodate* the conquered people in these Celtic areas and replaced therefore All Saints Day (originally celebrated in May) to the 1st of November. On the evening before All Saints Day, the churches held a vigil for the saints called *All Hallows' Eve* (Eve of the Holy Ones) or All Hallows'

E'en, thus Halloween. So actually Halloween is a combination of the heathen feast of the Dead and the Roman Catholic feast of "all saints." A bad combination!

Luther Day

We celebrate a different fact on that day. For a long time, the last day of October was regarded the day of the *Reformation*. That had also to do with All Saints Day, because Luther wanted to dispute his 95 theses on the first day of November 1517, when many theologians were together in Wittenberg on the occasion of the All Saints Day. In connection with the Reformation Day, I ask attention for Luther's words about *ongoing* reformation in a letter written seven years later. It was sent to the princes of the German states. Luther stated in it that Christian *schools* needed to be established and maintained. He wrote: "It is perfectly true that if universities and monasteries were to continue as they have been in the past, and there were no other place available where youth could study and live, then I could wish that no boy would ever study at all, but just remain dumb. For it is my earnest purpose, prayer, and desire that these asses' stalls and devil's training centers should either sink into the abyss or be converted into Christian schools. Now that God has so richly blessed us, however, and provided us with so many men able to instruct and train our youth aright, it is surely imperative that we not throw his blessing to the winds and let him knock in vain. He is standing at the door; happy are we who open to him! He is calling us; blessed is he who answers him! If we turn a deaf ear and he should pass us by, who will bring him back again?"

Let us remember our former misery, and the darkness in which we dwelt. Germany, I am sure, has never before heard so much of God's word as it is hearing today; certainly we read nothing of it in history. If we let it just slip by without thanks and honor, I fear we shall suffer a still more dreadful darkness and plague. O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God's grace and word while it is there! For you should know that God's word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. It has been with the Jews, but when it's gone it's gone, and now they have nothing. Paul brought it to the Greeks; but again when it's gone it's gone, and now they have the Turk. Rome and the Latins also had it; but when it's gone it's gone, and now they have the pope. And you Germans need not think that you will have it forever, for ingratitude and contempt will not make it stay. Therefore, seize it and hold it fast, whoever can; for lazy hands are bound to have a lean year" (Luther, 1962: 352ff.).

OUR PARENTAL PASTORATE

A quarter of a century ago someone in the Netherlands decided to publish a book of interviews. Fourteen people, formerly members of the Reformed church, had abandoned their Reformed faith. As a matter of course, such a book often contains quite an inventory of complaints, of many frustrations, and disappointments. In conclusion, however, the interviews were summarized, and then we also read the remarkable news that a professor of the synodical churches indicated feelings of sympathy with the remarks, and exclamations made by those ecclesiastical renegades, who had withdrawn themselves from the communion of the church.

It is even more remarkable to read that this professor agrees that "Calvinism does injury to children." He adds that, "It is well-known that Calvin used to stumble over the children" (Rothuisen, 1965: 214ff.).

Indeed, they dare to maintain the notion that Calvinism harms children. Their approach to the child was totally mistaken. Children missed proper guidance, and therefore the arrival of emancipation was an understandable phenomenon.

Over against this accusation, we want to show that our fathers did *not harm children at all. On the contrary, they understood their parental task. They also understood that parents have a pastoral task* over against their children. In this presentation we want to briefly discuss the parental pastorate as our fathers considered it. And then we will also see that in their care and concern for this pastorate they even promulgated synodical decrees during the reformation.

Guido de Brès

For just a moment, let us let our imagination take us back to the southern part of the Netherlands more than 400 years ago. The Reformed people were in the thick of many activities in that region. Some years before, Guido de Brès, minister of the church of Doornik (Tournay), had drafted a document to prove as clearly as possible to its readers, that the Calvinists had absolutely nothing to do with the rebellious Anabaptists. Over against this false allegation of rebellious collusion with the Anabaptists, he clearly expressed the desire of the Reformed church to conduct their relationship with the government along legal and legitimate channels.

This document was the booklet which would later be known in history as the Belgic Confession. In the summer of 1561, Guido de Brès probably had this booklet read by the University of Leyden professor, Saravia. Moreover, this booklet also received a form of ecclesiastical approbation and approval when the church of Antwerp officially expressed its agreement with it.

At this point, Rev. G. de Brès also wanted to send this booklet to the authorities, to make an urgent appeal to the rulers not to tar the Reformed people with the same brush used for the Anabaptists, as they had in the past.

Since the official channels had been closed to Guido de Brès, he had someone throw the booklet over the wall of the castle of Doornik, in the night of November 2, 1561. With the booklet de Brès also sent two letters directed to the attention of the king, Philip II, and another to the subordinate court officials. In addition, he also addressed a letter addressed to the commissaries of the king, or in their absence, the civil magistrates of the government of Doornik.

Neither de Brès' letter, nor the booklet ever reached its desired object. On November 4, 1561, already, Margaretha of Parma, the governor enacted a sharp edict against the propagation of the Confession which she had scarcely read! (De Pater, 1950:11).

As a direct consequence of this edict, Guido de Brès had to become a wanderer, always on the alert for enemies of the church. Initially he became a pastor of several churches in France, and then received a call from the church in Antwerp in 1566. The congregation in Valenciennes called him the year afterwards. In the latter place the enemies of the church caught up with him and persecuted him with imprisonment and then with death on the gallows in the same year, 1567, when he received the martyr's crown (Braekman, 1960: 264 ff.).

Antwerp

Antwerp has been mentioned several times already. In this city the Reformed church had immediately received the Belgic Confession as their own. Small wonder then, that this confession was initially called the "Confession d'Anvers" (confession of Antwerp).

I already mentioned earlier that Guido de Brès had been a minister of the church in Antwerp in the year before his death. Antwerp had become an important centre for the Reformed churches, for several synods had been held there and a number of important decisions had been made pertinent to the acceptance of the confession. This city had also become a very important international commercial centre by this time in history. And therefore very important to her Spanish overlords. This city would also become a focal point in the struggle for God and His Word in the Netherlands. Among the believers, the pen name of this city was “Capernaum.” The church itself in this city was called “La Vigne” (the Vine).

You will notice that the churches in the southern Netherlands had such pen names more often. Armentieres was called “Flower bud” and Ghent was called “Lily” and the church in Valenciennes was called “the Eagle.”

The Reformed people in Antwerp not only had a fierce struggle against the Romish, but they also had to fight the Anabaptists. This city had become an important Anabaptist centre. By 1565 they had no less than 25 to 30 places of public worship. No wonder that the church of Antwerp had asked for the help of Guido de Brès who had shown himself to be an indefatigable and well equipped opponent of the anabaptists.

The year before de Brès had come to Antwerp, Fabricius, their minister had suffered martyrdom. After the execution of their minister, the Reformed people of Antwerp made a united appeal to the governor, Margaretha. Is it not remarkable that they again submitted — together with their request — the Belgic Confession? Of course, it had become their confession of faith. But they too waited in vain for a response from the authorities.

Synod in “the Vine”

In the same year, 1565, a synod was held in Antwerp, the so-called Pentecost synod, held in “the Vine.” This synod again dealt with the Belgic Confession. In Article 1 of the Acts of this synod, the Belgic Confession is called “the confession of faith of the churches in this country;” as we saw already in the paragraph about the *Function of the Belgic Confession*.

“Pastors of their Families”

Perhaps you will ask: but what does this all have to do with our special topic. We also read at the very beginning (Article 3) of the Acts of the synod of Antwerp, 1565 — that is after having just established the place of the confession — the following statement: “The parents, as pastors in their families, must educate their children in the fear of God. Therefore they shall *not* send their children to schools or to other houses, where these children could be spoiled or attacked by an evil lifestyle and false doctrines.” It is very remarkable that in the official decision of synod, the Reformed parents are called “*pastors of their families*.” The parents, said this “Pentecost Synod in the Vine,” have a pastoral task with regard to their children. What the minister is for his congregation, the parents must be for their children. There must be a pastorate in the families, which functions in such a way, that parents educate their children in the *fear of God*. In order to be able to execute this task in a positive way the parents must take care that their children are not drawn away from the fear of God at schools or other houses where they could be infected by evil lifestyles or false doctrine.

At that time there were indeed many houses where evil lifestyles and false doc-

trines were taught. Many people lived licentiously. And one should not forget the evil behaviour of so many clergymen in the Roman Catholic church. There was also false doctrine: in the false church, but also in the schools evil thoughts were rampant.

Confession and Pastorate

I am of the opinion that there is a stronger connection between the first and third articles of the Acts of the Synod of Antwerp than we would initially suppose. In the beginning, the synod again established the confession as the common accord among the churches. An emphatic statement of confessional commonality had to be established to show the unity of doctrine. But what sense would it have if a doctrine is officially established, but it does not function in the practice of daily church life?

In other words, the pastorate of the pastor and teacher can be based on the pure doctrine, which has been officially accepted in the church, but the primary task now lies in the hands of the parents in their “small pastorate,” so that they instruct their children and have them instructed in the Reformed doctrine.

No Silted Reformation

More than four centuries ago, our fathers understood very well that a reformation may never be allowed to become silted up, and may never be placed on a dead track. But then, to prevent such calamities, it will be necessary that this reformation should receive a wide response in the families where the next generation must be educated in the fear of God. Then it will also be necessary that this reformation be continued in the *schools*, where the children must be instructed in the “*pura doctrina*,” the doctrine according to the confession, based on the infallible Word of God. This “*pura doctrina*” had been clearly defined over against Roman Catholics and Anabaptists, the double fronts in the time of the Reformation. Our fathers had high regard for that confession, for which its author and many believers had given their lives. They recognized the great importance of the unity of faith. Not everybody had to suffer the extreme experiences with respect to the confession, but together they did have to defend their common faith. And therefore it was of paramount importance to maintain this particular confession.

When pastors and teachers defended this doctrine, they had to lay a bridge with the families, where parents in their turn instructed their children in the doctrine. This pastoral task of the parents did not only become evident in their instruction, but also in the choice of places to which their children were sent: the houses and the schools.

These parents had the responsibility to examine whether good behaviour and the pure doctrine were promoted in these places. If the foregoing was not evident, then it was part of their pastoral task to remove their children from these places, and then to look for houses and schools where doctrine and lifestyle in accordance with the Scriptures were defended and upheld.

Calvin's Inheritance

Do not think that these ideas, as stated in official decisions of a synod four centuries ago, were brand new. Our fathers at the “Pentecost Synod in the Vine” were good disciples of *Calvin*, who had died just a year earlier.

From the beginning, Calvin emphatically stressed the pre-eminent importance of the instruction of the *youth of the church*. It is important to take note of this fact. Generally speaking it is well-known that Calvin paid much attention to ecclesiastical discipline. But it is remarkable that many people often overlook the fact that Calvin

considered the instruction of the young people in the church of equal importance with the ecclesiastical discipline.

No, Calvin did not harm the children. On the contrary, he paid great attention to the children of the church, by binding them to the doctrine which the parents had accepted as the pure doctrine according to the Word of God. Calvin said, "If the youth of the church is not instructed in the pure doctrine, in the houses, in the schools and in the church, then that would be at least as shameful and harmful as if the discipline were not maintained and the Holy Supper were defiled."

Calvin's first deed in the organization of ecclesiastical life in Geneva was the drafting of a regulation in which, in addition to discipline, also the instruction of the youth was established. Calvin said, "The instruction and education of the seed of the covenant is so important that the church cannot exist without it. Together with the discipline of the church, it is the important mean to further the perseverance and to promote the success of the reformation of the church. If this instruction of the youth fails, then all other labour is fruitless and useless, and there is no hope for the church anymore."

In Calvin's regulations we also read: "It is of great importance and very necessary — in order to keep the people in the pure doctrine — that the children of the church be instructed already, from their youngest age, that they are able to make profession of their faith, so that the doctrine of the gospel will not be destroyed, and that its significance will be remembered diligently, and be passed on from hand to hand and from father to son" (Van't Veer, 1942: 61 ff.).

Divine Command

*Calvin understood very clearly that the foundation of this instruction of the youth of the church was not to be an idle wish, let alone a certain hobby, but rather, a *divine command*. He said: "If this command was ever fitting and suitable, now it is the more necessary, when we discover the disregard of the Word of God which we observe with most of the people, and also the neglect of the parents to instruct their children in the way of God. In this regard, an astonishing ignorance is noted, which is in no way acceptable in the church."*

Time and again Calvin pointed to the parental task, which is, in this respect, a *pastoral task*. He says: "The parents are primarily responsible for the baptismal instruction. They have the duty to instruct their children, that a new generation may arise, equipped to the service of God. The LORD entrusted us with the doctrine of salvation, so that we would pass on that doctrine to our offspring. We must be diligent that God's government will be continued, that His service will not be interrupted, but will always flourish. We are entrusted with the responsibility that the true service of the LORD will be maintained and continued, also after our death. The existence of the church itself is at stake. That means: the progression of the service of the LORD in the generations after us. The seed of religion must remain after our death. And we as parents must take care that in the upcoming army of Jesus Christ, our children will receive their place."

The Priority of this Task

In Geneva, Calvin taught the elders of the church that this task with respect to their children, must have the highest priority. He obliged the parents not only to teach their children in the Scriptures of the Old and New Covenant, but also in the doctrine of the church. The ministers of the church had to supervise the progress of the instruc-

tion given by the parents. But also the church when it instructed the children every week, the parents were still obliged to instruct their children in the doctrine of the church. They were given the responsibility that the pertinent part of the doctrine was really known by the children. The ministers asked questions, to evaluate the knowledge of the children, but also in to check the diligence of the parents.

As far as the schools were concerned: the teachers had the task to instruct the children in the Scriptures, but also in the *doctrine of the church*. This instruction was not considered to be a branch or a subject beside many others. In the first school order of 1538, the relationship of this instruction is described in this respect: that the Word of God and the doctrine of the church is the *foundation of the whole education*. The other branches of learning were to be considered as valuable aids, to promote true and full knowledge.

In this way, parents in Calvin's time, had to be pastors in their families, who instructed their children themselves, and had them instructed in the doctrine according to the Word of God. Completely in accordance with this practice, the synod of Antwerp decided one year after Calvin's death, that the parents had to educate their children in the Fear of God, as pastors of their families. And because of this pastorate in the family, they could not send their children to schools or other houses in which these children would be infected by wrong ideas, contrary to the pure doctrine.

Our fathers thoroughly understood: if there is to be a future for the church of the LORD, if the church is not to perish in this world, then new generations must arise time and again, which in the homes, in the schools and in the church, will be instructed in the doctrine of the Word of God.

This is a *primary* pastorate, this pastoral task in the families, that the parents pay close attention to these matters!

I am of the opinion that the church would have been spared much grief if this primary pastorate of the parents had been honoured continuously. If *father and mother* no longer understand their pastoral task with respect to their children; if parents do not give *priority* to this task, then without any doubt, *deformation* in the church will raise its ugly head!

Therefore this matter is also a primary concern: what is the state of the instruction of the seed of the covenant? Our concern is not only directed to the instruction in the church, the catechism instruction, but also the instruction done through the pastoral offices of the parents.

And no less, the instruction given in the schools.

Parents must also concern themselves with the question: to which school must we send our children? Do we keep a close eye on these schools in which our children receive instruction, that these schools do not spoil our children so that they become infected by bad behaviour and bad doctrines?

Are the schools connected to the instruction in the homes and in the church?

Do we really fight, and sacrifice for such schools which have this relationship, that they are properly maintained? Are we on our guard, that these schools, which began as Reformed schools, really *remain* Reformed schools?

Are the parents diligent, to the utmost of their power as pastors of their families to educate their children in the fear of God?

In one word, that is the calling of parents who fulfill their promises given at the baptism of their children, and who also understand their task.

Automatically?

Will everything then automatically go all right with respect to our children?

Of course not!

We cannot keep our children.

We can only *guard* them. That watchful service is a difficult but beautiful office. It is a pastoral office.

And if later these children turn away from the church, then it may never be said to have been caused by their parents who neglected their pastoral office.

Then never may we hear the reproach that “Calvinism does harm to the children” and that Calvin used children as a stumbling block.

Parents do not stumble over children, but children stumble over parents. They stumble over the office and the doctrine of the parents, which the parents wanted to entrust to them.

In this time of indoctrination of *false* doctrines, especially by means of the modern media, we have to dare to stand for the oath sworn at the baptismal font. We have to dare to say “no!” to the spirit of our days, which reproaches us of narrow-mindedness.

We will have to bear the accusation that we are extremist and conservative. Throughout the ages similar accusations have been heard. Such accusations are not the worst things to bear. What is much worse, is that we would neglect our primary pastoral task, that we refused to equip our children against the dangers of our time, and that we were passive over against the danger of the infections of evil behaviour and bad doctrines.

May the LORD grant us parents who want to be pastors in their families, who will teach their children to use the weapons with which they have to contend — not against flesh and blood — but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Therefore, may the LORD grant us parents and children who take the whole armour of God, that they may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand!