

God Addresses Us

Beloved of him

We have seen that making profession is not a matter of our own, free choice, but of God's sovereign choice, to which we may respond by his grace. We will shortly see this in the opening words said during public profession of faith. The first words spoken at that time are: "Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ." With that we are called by *name*. We are *beloved*, beloved of God because of the redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the name by which we are called. By that name our nobility and honour and our entire *existence*, is expressed. We are called beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ, beloved of him, who is the Saviour of the world and our Redeemer. Our programme is contained in that name. As such we may act, as such we may always gather together and as such we are addressed, as beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ. In this name all the riches and tenderness of God's relationship with us are expressed. In this way God says that he has manifested his love in his only begotten Son.

He is the Lord. That means: He is the Owner, who has bought us not just for money, but with his own life. Because of that we are set free from the power of evil and of the devil who no longer has claim on us.

He is also Jesus, our Saviour, who delivers us from the power of evil. There is no one else who can do this for us. He is also Christ: the Anointed. He has made God's plan of salvation known to us. He has sacrificed himself to save us. And he has given us his protection in order that nothing may undo this salvation. All this is contained in that address: "Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Not for the first time

Are we addressed like this for the first time when we make our profession of faith? No, in order to correctly understand this address we have to go back to our *baptism*. There we were first addressed by God in his church. For there the LORD God called us by our name, and joined our name with his own name: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

At the time of our baptism the LORD God, by means of his servant, sealed his promise to us. At the time we were not yet able to see or hear this, for we were not yet conscious of things. But nevertheless, God *did* speak to us at that time. Before we could utter one word the LORD already spoke to us. And he kept on speaking to us; he kept impressing that baptism on our hearts. At one time the LORD said: "You are mine, my child!" He told us this in baptism. And he kept calling us like that, as we grew up and matured. That is the reason why there is such a close connection between baptism and confession. At our baptism we were unable to answer for ourselves. Our parents had to do that for us. Otherwise we would have had to respond to God's address already then.

Delayed response

Saying that such a profession is really a delayed response to baptism is not overstating the case. Calvin taught this in one of his early writings, not long after the first edition of his "Institutes". The reformer was only 27 years old at the time. He writes: "Covenant children must be instructed so that they may give a testimony of their faith in the end, which they were unable to do when they were baptized."

In his "Institutes" he relates that in the old church it was customary for the children of Christians, after they were grown up, to be brought before the minister "in order that they might fulfill the duty required of adults; presenting themselves for baptism." For, according to Calvin, when they were baptized as small children, they could not yet make their profession.

The reformer stated it this way: a small child cannot speak yet, and has not yet come to higher senses. Therefore, for covenant children, making profession of faith is the discharge of an obligation, required of them at their baptism, but temporarily delayed.

Only one reason

Calvin wrote: Only one valid reason can be given to the Lord as to why covenant children were not yet able to make confession of faith. And that one reason is that the children of the covenant lack sufficient knowledge as yet to partake in the Lord's Supper. You must be able to examine yourself, says Paul to the Corinthians, before being able to celebrate the Lord's Supper. (1 Corinthians 11:28) This requires

knowledge, also self-knowledge which toddlers and very young children do not have as yet.

According to Calvin, there is no other possible reason that is acceptable to the LORD. Certainly not this one: "I am not quite ready; I am not sure that I really believe in Christ." God has sealed his promise in baptism. Then what right does anyone have to doubt? Who may disregard these promises? At this point Calvin addresses the young people: "You should have made profession of your faith at the hour of your baptism. Already then the LORD gave you this obligation. Only because of your weakness has this confession been postponed!"

As soon as feasible

Is it not too early for me to do profession of faith? This question is sometimes asked. In the light of Calvin's teaching about the connection between baptism and confession, this is not a valid question. The reformer felt that one should rather ask a different question: at this moment, is there any reason not to make profession of faith? May I keep the Lord waiting any longer for the response he requested at my baptism?

Calvin drew a parallel with baptism. The administration of baptism may not be postponed, for the LORD has a claim on the child that is born into his covenant. Baptism should be administered as soon as feasible to the children of believers.

"The consistory shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible." (Article 57 of the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches) We should not keep the LORD waiting! This is also true for profession of faith. This too should take place as soon as possible for the children of the covenant. Calvin refers to a custom in the old church by saying that profession of faith took place at the end of childhood, or at the beginning of adolescence. He writes that to him it seems best if "a child at the age of 10 years would present himself to the congregation to make profession of faith". In the Dutch refugee Church of London, the cradle of the church of the reformation in the Netherlands, the age was set at 14 - still very young by our standards. We should keep in mind that in those days instruction in the doctrine of the church was started at an earlier age. One thing is certain: from the hour of baptism the demand for confession calls to be fulfilled. Therefore any unnecessary delay is wrong.

God's good pleasure

Once we have discovered the close connection between baptism and confession, we are more and more brought to worship God's good pleasure. It is not "normal" that we are born covenant children. It is not a matter of course that the LORD gave us parents who presented us for baptism. Behind this is God's gracious election, his good pleasure. It is written about the Saviour himself that his Father in heaven spoke at his baptism: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17). The LORD addressed us likewise in baptism. He calls us by name and joins us to his Name. In doing so God has shown his good pleasure in our lives. His good pleasure goes out to us; his goodwill. The LORD *honours* himself in this way. And what an honour this is for us!

This is what we discover when we make profession of faith. We look back to our baptism and worship God's good pleasure in our life. This confession is not a part of us, a kind of diploma we present ourselves with. No, it is a certificate of God's grace in our lives. This is included in that address "Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ."

When Peter made his good confession before the Lord: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" he was not complimented for having done something good. No, rather Christ said: "Peter, this did not come from yourself." He was blessed, but not because of his own merit. The reaction of the Saviour was: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 16:17) Others hadn't convinced Peter of this, nor was it his own idea. The Father revealed this to him. It is God's good pleasure in his life. The LORD made him able to make this confession. It *is* Peter who expresses himself, and he speaks from the heart, but he expresses what God himself has put into his heart: the worship of God's good pleasure.

That is making profession. You don't speak from your own heart, you confess with heart and mouth the great love, the sovereign good pleasure of the faithful covenant God in your entire life.