

A Free Choice?

What is making profession of faith?

In this book we address young people who "make profession of faith". What does that actually mean, "make profession of faith"? It is an expression taken from the Bible. Making profession actually means: *to openly declare for something or someone*. In his first letter to Timothy, the apostle Paul says that Jesus Christ in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession (1 Timothy 6:13). There it is said that even the Saviour himself made confession! The Lord Jesus before the Roman judge openly declared that he was the Son of God. He had publicly testified that he had come into this world to save sinners from perdition. He frankly declared what his calling was. Jesus himself testified the good confession. But Paul says this in the same breath with the calling of Christians to make confession; just before this he wrote to Timothy: "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." (1 Timothy 6:12) So Timothy, too, has made confession. He declared that the Lord Jesus was his Redeemer, his Saviour. And that did not happen in private.

This was not just a matter between Paul and Timothy. There were many people present. It happened in the presence of many witnesses, publicly. Timothy had confessed his faith openly. In Acts 16:1 he is called a disciple. And then it is added that he was well spoken of by the brethren at Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:2). Timothy had not been ashamed of his faith! The faith, of which he made confession, concerned Jesus Christ, the Lord, whom he confessed as the Son of God, and the Saviour.

I believe

The person who makes confession says: "I believe". And that belief is always belief in the LORD God. We already find a confession like this in the Old Testament. In the book of Ruth, we read that this pagan woman from Moab wants to accompany her mother-in-law Naomi to Bethlehem. She does not want to return to Moab's paganism, saying:

"Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16) Ruth openly declares the God of Israel to be her God. And she also wants to belong to the people of Israel, to the *Church* of those days.

We come across a confession more than once in the New Testament as well, especially in regards to Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah, the Son of God. When the Saviour sent out his disciples, he himself called people to this confession: "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven". (Matthew 10:32) Here the Lord Christ is saying: "He who openly acknowledges me and his faith in me, for him, I in turn, will plead his cause before my Father in heaven." The Saviour also shows us the reverse, "Whoever denies me before men, I also will also deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 10:33)

In the latter part the Lord Christ means: he who does not confess me proves thereby that a real, deep union between us never existed. The Lord Jesus openly expresses this, as he said earlier: "then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Matthew 7:23) Thus, the Saviour only gives two options: to confess or to deny. To deny means: denial of a close relationship of unity. Shortly after this passage we find the description of Peter's confession. Christ had asked his disciples what kind of person the people thought he was. The replies were quite varied. One said: He is John the Baptist; another called him some sort of prophet. When they were asked the question on a more personal level, Peter became the mouthpiece for the other disciples: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16) Jesus and the Messiah are one and the same, says Peter. But he also says: He is the Son of God, with whom the Father is well pleased. He is the Son of the God: Christ the Messiah is not a dumb image of wood and stone. No, he is a living reality! Peter, in the New Testament, is first in the line of all those who confess their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

There are other places in the New Testament that mention such confessions, for instance in the Acts of the Apostles. There we read about the Ethiopian eunuch confessing his faith before being baptized by Philip. He does so with these words: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." (Acts 8:37)

Confession and Baptism

From this last example of the eunuch confessing his faith before Philip, it is clear that confession and baptism are closely connected. In the early period of the Christian church adults were baptized. Often that would have happened *with* their families, as we may still see today on the mission fields. But their baptism meant joining the Christian church, and at the same time admission to the Lord's Supper. With their words: "I believe..." they made public profession of faith.

For instance the twelve articles (the Apostles' Creed) originated from a confession of faith made at baptism in the second century in Rome. Just as in the case of the eunuch, we can see there a very clear connection between confession and baptism.

Pagans who wanted to become Christians had to say "I do" to their baptism and in doing so said "I do" to the Lord's Supper as well. In this way they indicated that they openly wished to declare for God, and that they were not ashamed to be called "Christians".

Not "confirmation"

The term "making profession" is a better one than, for instance, "confirmation", as it is commonly used by the Roman Catholics. In the Roman Catholic church this "confirmation" is even one of the seven sacraments. The bishop usually administers this sacrament by the laying on of hands, anointing the forehead, and pronouncing these words: "I mark you with the sign of the cross and confirm you with the oil of salvation in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." This sacrament of confirmation is received at a very young age at which children should be confirmed according to the Roman Catholic church. It is important to understand the *background* of this "sacrament".

The Roman Catholic church believes that the sacrament contains *grace* and transfers grace. This happens in a *magical* way, a sort of conjuring trick. During the administration of the sacrament, the transfer of grace takes place simultaneously. In baptism, often called "christening" by the Roman Catholics, the grace of forgiveness of sins is transferred. In confirmation, the grace of the Holy Spirit is transferred to consolidate the confession. The Roman Catholic church sees this sacrament as a complement to baptism. The liturgical, sacramental action is of prime importance. In a Roman Catholic book of doctrine we

may read it this way: "Next to and following the sacrament of spiritual birth there is also a sacrament of spiritual maturity, of the shaped, adult age, suitable for fruitful labour and battle. This complement is confirmation, in which Christ imparts his Holy spirit in a special way." This "special way" then is a *magical* way, in which a special grace is imparted to the person who is being confirmed.

It is true that Rome then *speaks* of maturity, but meanwhile this sacrament is administered at a very early age, without the recipient actually realizing what it is all about. Therefore the common practice of the Middle Ages was one in which special instruction for the youth of the church was unheard of.

Of course a reformed Calvin was angered by this "sacrament". He calls the introduction of "confirmation" the work of the devil himself, by means of which Satan managed to bring about terrible destruction in the church, by giving rise to much superstition.

Not "incorporation"

In some "protestant" circles "incorporation" or "acceptance of members" or "being received in the membership" is spoken of instead of making profession. Without considering this to be a sacrament, the emphasis is on what the *church* does. "Incorporation" becomes an action of the church, taking place in a solemn manner. The church grants a kind of document to certify the ending of a youth period. This ending coincides approximately with the end of the school years. This has developed into a kind of church custom, the profound spiritual meaning of which has eluded many. The connection with baptism, and also with the Lord's Supper, is here hidden behind a solemn church ceremony.

The connection with *instruction* is lost in many cases as well. Even though this is not called a sacrament, there is a certain parallel with Roman Catholic confirmation. And besides that, it seems then that they were not incorporated in the church before. But infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation. (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 27)

At our own pleasure?

Therefore confession of faith is not a matter of a church ceremony. It is not a formal acceptance as a church member either. Neither is it a formal agreement with the doctrine of the church. No, it is a matter of personal confession. It has to do with what the apostle Paul writes to the Romans: "For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." (Romans 10:10) This text is used in the opening words of many articles of the Belgic Confession: "We believe and confess..."

Now the question arises: doesn't making profession of faith depend on whether the person involved chooses to do so? Some answer this question with a wholehearted "Yes!" They say that making profession is a very personal matter. No one must interfere, or pressure me - not the consistory, or my parents, or my friends. We can hear it in many ways: "I am totally free to decide if I am making profession, or not. And I don't have to believe *because* my parents believe. Neither do I have to believe *what* my parents believe. I must make my own free choice."

All this sounds very logical and convincing. And yet this reasoning is wrong. It is not a matter of what pleases *us*, but of what pleases the LORD God. It pleases God to include us in his covenant. That was the free, sovereign good pleasure of the LORD God. It was his election. We may belong to the people of God's choosing. When we make profession we do not say: "This is my own, free choice." No, we say: "This is *God's* choice. He has chosen me in his boundless love. And now I may respond to his election and return his love."

And the answer we give is not some sort of repayment on our part, in this vein: "I did this for you, now what will you do for me?" No, it is the response to God's gracious election in our life. We don't have a note of our own to sound. We have no voice in the matter. All we can sound is the *echo* to God's redemption, the *echo* to God's grace, which we were allowed to discover in our life. This is making profession.

Form for the Public Profession of Faith

Beloved in our Lord Jesus Christ:

We thank the Lord our God for the grace given us by adopting us to be his children and receiving us into his covenant. We acknowledge his love and power, by which he instills in his children the desire publicly to profess their faith in him in the presence of his holy church, so that they may receive admission to the holy supper.

Since you have now come here to make this profession before God and his holy church, and hereby to receive admission to the holy supper, we ask you to answer sincerely to the following questions:

First, do you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian church? Do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this doctrine in life and death, rejecting all heresies and errors conflicting with God's Word?

Second, do you acknowledge God's covenant promises, which have been signified and sealed to you in your baptism? Do you truly detest and humble yourself before God because of your sins and seek your life outside of yourself in Jesus Christ?

Third, do you declare that you love the Lord God and that it is your heartfelt desire to serve him according to his Word, to forsake the world, and to crucify your old nature?

Fourth, do you firmly resolve to commit your whole life to the Lord's service as a living member of his church? Do you promise to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the church, if it should happen, and may God graciously prevent it, that you become delinquent either in doctrine or in conduct?

_____, what is your answer?

Answer: *I do.*

After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 5:10,11)