

## **THE BODY OF JESUS CHRIST**

In our last issue we presented a translated article by H.W. van Egmond entitled What About the Church? In it he remarks on the fact that when it comes to priorities the Church was considered to be in fourth place by an evangelical outreach organization in Reformed circles in the Netherlands. You will find the conclusion of that article in this issue. But the matter of Church has also been in discussion in other Reformed circles of late. It is not mere coincidence that the Church becomes an increasing discussed topic. For many of the differences that exist among us stem from our view of what the Church is.

Recent debates held on Reformed internet discussion groups have also been about the Church. Both Refnet (a general discussion group of mainly Can. Ref'd church members) and Skreednet (a restricted discussion group for Reformed students) are holding discussions about cooperation with Christians from other denominations and voluntary withdrawal of membership from one church to move to another. The tenor of many of these discussions has been that the Church is one over all the earth; and that believers may not be criticized for moving from one such gathering to another. In this discussion some take it for granted that they have the prerogative to decide which denomination or congregation(s) are true and that they can join them as they see fit.

The Holy Spirit has told us, via the apostle Paul when he wrote to the Ephesians, that our place, our status, our destiny was chosen for us by our heavenly Father even before we were born. He loved us so much that He sent His only begotten Son to suffer and die so that we might be united with Him in one body, Christ Jesus being the Head. He chose us to be "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." (Eph. 2: 19-22).

These words indicate that the Church is a specific gathering, not just any gathering. It must be based on the apostles and prophets, i.e. on the Word of God. It is also quite clear that for this gathering to be a true Church it may not merely be a gathering where things are done and believed more or less according to the Word of God, but conducted and confessed exactly as it has been revealed. Further, these words indicate that we have all received a particular place in that gathering work of Jesus Christ. It is, then, a very serious matter when we believe it to be good to move away from that place.

Rather, we should consider the analogy of the parental home. Just as God has placed us in our parental home, so he also placed us in the household of God. It is not by chance that we happen to be members of the Church where we are born into or have come to be a member after conversion. That is also guided and ordained by our Father. Now this does not mean that we may never leave the congregation into which we are born, but it does mean that we may not 'willy-nilly' move around whenever the mood strikes us.

Only fifty years ago Churches in the Netherlands were city wide Churches. They were so large that they would often meet in several buildings. They would also often be divided in wards. In such cases there was only one church in a place, but possibly divided into several wards. There was one consistory, even though the wards might also meet separately. To extrapolate this into current terms, the City of Surrey might have one Church instead of being separated into Maranatha

and Cloverdale, Langley might not be divided into Willoughby Heights, Langley and Aldergrove, and Burlington might be one instead of East, West and North. Such an organization would help prevent the present situation where some members leave one Church in a city to join another in the same city.

The fact that there are many 'Christian churches' or denominations also did not happen by mere coincidence. Church schisms do not come about at the drop of a hat or over minor disagreements. Usually both sides are convinced that the truth of Scripture is on their side. They must, for the sake of the honour of God, break with those who refuse to accept, in humility, what God has taught His children so clearly in His Word. Yes, those who leave friends, family, and business for the sake of the truth do not take lightly the differences that exist between federations, denominations, and sects. Therefore, members leaving the place where God has placed them and moving to a different place, federation, or denomination may not be taken lightly.

Such haphazard moving denies the oneness of the local body of Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us that the body is made up of various members, each with their specific task. If we believe that, how can some so easily get up and leave? Do we not have a task, there, where God has placed us. May we, when we disagree about something or when we can't get along with a fellow brother or sister, just get up and leave? Or must we be obedient to the calling God has given us in the place where He has put us?

Now someone might ask: "Does that mean that we can never move from the original Church we find ourselves in?" Of course it is possible that we are led to a different city or even country. But this is not just a whim. Our place in the world is not a chance appearance. God, our heavenly Father, has given us places. And sometimes He moves His children. Remember how He came to Abram and told Him to move.

Today we do not get special dreams from God to tell us to move, but He does direct the events in our lives. He will also direct the events that lead us to consider moving. And just like in every other decision we make, we must ask Him for guidance when we begin to consider such a matter. We must consider whether the idea of moving is for the right or the wrong reasons. We have also received gifts from God that can help us in these decisions. The foremost of these is the gift of prayer. Jesus Christ, by His suffering and death, has opened the way of communication between us and God. Through this route of faithful and trusting prayer we can be confident of receiving divine guidance in our deliberations. Further, we belong to the communion of saints, we have received office bearers who may give us advice, often we might have family and relatives that may assist us, we have brothers and sisters in the Lord to whom we may turn for advice. Of course, in the end we will be responsible if we move away from the Church. But those whose help we have sought are responsible for the advice they have given.

When we approach the matter of leaving the Church in this manner we give proper priority to our heavenly Father and the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ. Then we don't give the highest priority to our own feelings, but we subject ourselves to the direction of our Father. Then the announcement for our leaving and the destination Church will not be so difficult to determine.

It is only when we want to follow our own direction that the announcement of our departure may be unpleasant. It is when we use our own measuring stick with regard to the Church that we may find ourselves in places we don't belong.

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## Different Practices of Baptism Reflect a Fundamentally Different View of Salvation.

By Rev. E. Kampen

Recently I read a book entitled, "**These Evangelical Churches of Ours.**"<sup>1</sup> I was very interested to see which churches the author considered "evangelical". It turned out to be quite a long list including Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal, Baptist, and ... Reformed! The author also described some of the points of friction between these various groups but he reduced them to mere difference of opinion which he felt did not break the basic unity among these groups. Among the differences was the matter of *believer only baptism* versus *adult and infant baptism*.

It is convenient to reduce the matter to a difference of opinion but is that honest? Do not both sides claim to speak from Scripture? Does the one not exclude the other? If the one is true must not the other be false?

As a Reformed Church we have a very clear statement on the matter of who should be baptized in both the Heidelberg Catechism (q. & a 74) and the Belgic Confession (art. 34). The Confessions reflect the struggle with the Anabaptists who advocated vociferously for *believer only baptism*, which meant only adults should be baptized. A study of the time of the Reformation will reveal that the Reformers and Anabaptists did not consider themselves allies<sup>2</sup>. The Anabaptists, among other things, criticized the Reformers for being too mild. More radical action was needed. Hence the Anabaptists have also been described as the *Radical Reformation*.

With a view to evaluating the situation today it may be good to ask ourselves why the Reformers so vigorously opposed the Anabaptists. The bottom line was that the Anabaptists had a fundamentally different view of salvation. Rather than give *God* the honour for the *initiative and implementation* of the covenant of grace, they twisted things. God may have taken the initiative but *man* had to decide to take God up on the offer of living in this covenant relationship. For the *implementation* God had to wait for man! Entering the covenant was a *voluntary act* of man. Note that aspect of *voluntarism*. Subsequently, baptism was seen as a public testimony that you had accepted God's invitation.

Among the key texts brought forward to prove this point was Mk. 16:16, "*he who believes and is baptized will be saved*" (cf. Mat. 28:19). It was said that this teaches a clear sequence: believe *then* baptism. It was also argued that all examples in the N.T. involve adult baptism. When you study this text carefully, you will note that it is made to say too much. Baptism is only mentioned in passing. The context is the risen Lord mandating his disciples to preach his resurrection not just in Israel but the whole world. In the process he answers the question: how is it possible for the world, the gentiles, to share in him? Clearly, through faith! They don't have to become Jews, for salvation is not through the flesh but through faith. Furthermore, by speaking of baptism, there is a contrast to circumcision. Here is the new, international sign of the covenant, both for Jews and Gentiles. As for the examples in the N.T., of adult only baptisms, what else would you expect in a missionary situation? But what about second generation Christians? The Lord did not have to spell

out again that the children of Christians are included in his covenant too. He did have to spell out that there was a new sign of the covenant, namely, baptism.

The idea of believer only baptism is actually based on a very superficial reading of Scripture. If this type of exegesis is followed, then you have to conclude that children cannot be saved. Follow it through logically. The Lord says clearly: those who *believe*...will be saved. Since children can't believe, they can't be saved. "Believer only baptism" people have absolutely no ground in Scripture for any comfort should their children die in infancy. To be sure, there are theories like the "principle of unaccountability" which suggests that every child dying before the age of accountability (approximately age 12 or 13) will be saved. We hear the same sort of thinking in songs like "Jesus loves all the little children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world." That is fantasy, not Scripture. If that is true, then we should stop all opposition to abortion for at least all the infants killed in the mother's womb would go to heaven. If they are born, they might not believe and go to hell! Furthermore, as for what happens to the children of unbelievers, read the imprecatory Psalms.

In the end, the reason for this misunderstanding and misuse of Scripture is because of the underlying theological issue. The texts are misquoted because the covenant of grace has been replaced with a Semi-pelagianism approach where man is seen as spiritually sick. He is in need of some help but able to accept or reject help. Anabaptism was a re-tooling of semi-pelagianism. Arminianism is in the same line. The appeal of course is that this extols the dignity of man. We have a choice, it seems. Scripture interpretation is shaped by the semi-pelagian theology.

What does Scripture say? Paul says in Ephesians 2 that we are dead in sins and trespasses. Being dead in our sins, we have no ability to respond to the call of God unless he first of all makes us alive! Only when you accept this Scriptural given of our spiritual deadness do your eyes open up to the covenant of grace in the true sense of the Word--*God* coming to man, *God* working new life. God does not come to those who come to him. No, he comes to those whom he chooses, which includes the *children* of believers. As a matter of fact, the baptism of infants drives home most vividly that salvation is a gift of grace. Baptism is not an act of man by which he makes a statement about what he has done but it is an act of God in which he makes a statement of salvation in Christ received through faith and faith alone. To deny infant baptism is to deny God's grace and replace it with merit, as if God is dependent upon our response before he can give his grace to us. To deny infant baptism is telling God: you can't do that! **Man** must believe first. Then Christ is robbed of his saving power, and it is ascribed to **man's faith**. Then faith is no longer the means by which we receive Christ but becomes the basis for receiving Christ.

It is very well possible that many "believer only baptism" people today don't realize the roots and theological implication of their practice. This gives us room to discuss it with them, and by God's grace show them the way of truth. The Reformers too entered into vigorous debate with the Anabaptists to convince them of the teachings of Scripture. But even though many today in evangelical circles may not realize the full implications, that does not take away that the basic theological position for "believer only baptism" is not a variety of the Reformation but a denial of the Reformation. It robs God of his glory and believers of their comfort. Here is the battle line of truth versus error: God's sovereign grace or man's free will. Does God decide who's in the covenant, or man?

In light of Scripture it should be clear that "believer only baptism" versus "adult and infant baptism" is not a point of indifference but a truth and comfort issue. It is only when you see the covenant of grace initiated and implemented by God that you realize: my children too are holy! They too belong to God. Is God saying that every last covenant child is automatically saved? No, remember, that's not what baptism is saying. Scripture teaches us about Esau, those who despise the covenant. Baptism is not a sign and seal of *salvation* but a *sign and seal of being saved because of the blood and Spirit of Christ out of grace, through faith*. The promise is *to believers and their children*. God works through the generations. God says: these are the people whom I choose. Who are you to argue with me? The Lord has never replaced his *grace* with the *voluntary act of man* as the way to enter the covenant.

Indeed, the *covenant of grace* is the key! Then we understand why our children too should be baptized. And that causes a deep sense of awe to fall over us as we marvel: God established his covenant with believers and their children. He has marked us all, young and old, sheep, rams and little lambs, his precious flock. He has set us apart. That leads us to say: I don't understand it! I don't deserve it. " *What shall I render to my Saviour now for all the riches of His consolation? ... Jerusalem, come join with me and bless Him all your days!*"<sup>3</sup>.

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## Notes

1. Mackey, L. [These Evangelical Churches of Ours](#). (Winfield, B.C. Wood Lake Books, Inc. 1995).
2. An excellent book in explaining the background to the Reformed understanding of baptism and its fundamental difference from Anabaptist "believer only baptism" is [The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century](#) by Hughes Oliphant Old. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992)
3. See Ps. 116, words quoted are from stanzas 7 -10 as found in [The Book of Praise](#)

## What about the Church (2)

By H.W.van Egmond

### *God's Care*

Those who put the church in the fourth position of priority likely do so because they believe that this is where God lets His people partake of His care. There God gives the visitor new strength and motivation to 'keep it up' in his life. Now it is certainly true that the church is the object of God's care. 1 Peter 5:7 cast all your anxieties on Him, for He cares about you. From the context it appears that Peter is thinking about the flock of God, verse 2. Jesus Christ is the chief shepherd of this flock, verse 4. He is the good shepherd that cares for His sheep.

But who is Peter referring to when he speaks about the sheep? Is he thinking about those "shoppers" who make up their own mind as to which "church store" they will visit for the care they want for their own particular concerns? Is it those people who will discern what they require from God for their family and work? Will they decide for themselves what spiritual purchases they need to make that will best address their particular needs? Peter is very clear in his letter about who he considers to be "the sheep of God". In chapter five he speaks directly to the elders, the office bearers.

*The Address of God to His People*

The office bearers are admonished to tend the flock that is under their charge. They are called to care for the congregation of God. And this is a care that is of life-threatening importance. For it deals with their life with Christ. And this life is not compartmentalized! Christ has laid claim to our whole life. Every aspect of it belongs to Him. With His blood He bought the entire breadth of our life. He lays claim to every aspect of our social life as it applies to family and work. In our relationship with Christ we must also deal with our marriages and our families, including the upbringing that is associated with it. Our work is not outside of the care and rule of Christ. The appointed, the office bearers, must address Christ's people about these matters in His Name. At different times this will be in the form of comfort and at other times in the form of admonition. But it is from this instituted office of care that Christ addresses His church. Marriage, raising children, daily work and financial stewardship shall all be discussed in the light of God's will by the elders, in Christ's name. In all these relationships it is God Who directs the way we should follow. In light of our salvation He is the One Who can do that best. For, of ourselves, we can not determine our spiritual needs. And as the result of sin we no longer have a good understanding of our difficulties. How can we, who are so blinded, compare our diagnosis with God's? It is God, Himself, Who must, by His Word; point out our sins, shortcomings, and wrong desires. Beyond that, by that same Word, He must show us the correct way to proceed in life with Him. God is the God of our life. It is His Word that is determinative in the life of His people.

*No Independence*

With that in mind the elders go on family visits, the ministers preach the Word and administer the sacraments. God has entrusted His flock to them. When the officebearers do their work in obedience to the Over Shepherd, God shows His care for the congregation through them (verse 4).

Earlier in his letter Peter described the definition of the congregation by pointing to the Old Testament. In chapter 2:9, 10 we read, " but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. Once you were no people but now you are God's people. To accomplish this lofty position Christ had to complete His work. By His suffering and death He has bought the Father's care, with His blood, for the church. Because of Him the church is God's people. And it is under His mandate that the officebearers participate in preserving His church as the people of God. That is how Christ wants His people to live as a holy priesthood in the service of God. As over Shepherd He is involved in all the activities of His church. Therefore we may not consider the church as a independent care-giver. The head of the church lays claim to the social life of the members of the church. For living under the care of God immediately results in the call to live for God. When God is (correctly) considered in the first place then His Word is also in the first place. For neither the Father nor the Son can be considered apart from the Word. Christ has His living, authoritative Word proclaimed in the gathering of His people (Lord's Day 25). Peter writes about that in Chapter 2:9 when he tells the people of God that they must declare His wonderful deeds. Within the people of God lives the peace and joy of the surety of God's grace. With the certainty that God has proclaimed in His church, we participate in our social activities - from out of the church! That's why we may not regard the gathering of God's people from our personal preference. We may not enter a church meeting based on our preference, or with the idea of "shopping", or

with an idea of independence. *We* don't choose what we are in need of. Nor may we discard what doesn't suit us. Christ distributes the gifts of grace according to His own will. We receive from Him what He deems necessary for our lives in His care. You are God's people - royalty, but with a task. Let yourselves be as living stones in that church building, bringing spiritual sacrifices. Bring sacrifices to God, to His honor. That's the reason God has chosen a people unto Himself (Eph. 1:4).

### *A Royal Priesthood*

To typify the place of the church of the new covenant Peter can, without hesitation, use texts from the old covenant: Ex. 19:5-6, you are God's own possession - the precious, personal possession of the Lord. Indeed, a royal priesthood. Priests are called to serve God within an enclosed unity. In the priesthood there is no place for a singleton who wants to serve God as a soloist. They have a communal task. Our calling in the communal unity of the royal priesthood is to proclaim God's wonderful deeds. It is from within that royalty that Peter shows the people of God their calling, cf. chap.2:13ff. Because you are a church of God you are called to a Christian lifestyle in family and at work. Only under the pastoral care of the Over Shepherd, Jesus Christ can we speak about social relationships. Those who live under the people of God desire to participate in the warfare of this royal priesthood. Concretely, those who begin with God in the first place desire to live in his church. For from Him is the fountain of life. And in His light is *the* light. From out of the church the light of God's Word shines over family and society.