

FREE TO DISAGREE?

Confessional Binding and Mental Reservations

We concluded the last editorial of Volume 5 of Reformed Polemics (June 26/99) with the observation that “it is obvious that there continues to be the need to engage in polemics; in the art or practice of disputation or controversy; specifically polemical theology, which has for its object refutation of errors.” We made this observation in the context of our discussion about confessional membership (confessional binding), and we stated that “it only helps to be straight-forward about this whole matter: the question is whether the churches are willing to maintain this practice of confessional binding (or call it confessional membership), or are willing to sacrifice it for the sake of unity with those who will not be bound to the true confession of God’s Word. Maintain or sacrifice? That, in short, is the question.” And so we again need to deal with the pertinent and timely question of whether we, as Reformed biblically based believers, are still willing to affirm that all of us, as communicant church members, are fully bound to the literal text of our Reformed confession of Scripture, or whether we are prepared to allow church members to “feel free to disagree” and have “mental reservations” about what we believe and confess.

In the September 29/95 issue of Reformed Polemics we examined a proposal by a certain George Stob to get rid of the Form of Subscription. We noted that the “reasons” advanced for the need to drop this form were questionable, unscriptural and dishonest. Stob’s pious sounding proposal is in the final analysis nothing more than an unwillingness to be fully bound to the accepted doctrinal standards of the Church, in particular The Three Forms of Unity. We also noted that the views expressed by George Stob are not solely the sentiments of some members of the Christian Reformed Church. There are also members in the Canadian Reformed Churches who, although they are willing to sign the Form of Subscription and are disposed to consider themselves bound to the Reformed creeds, do so with “mental reservations.” They bind themselves to the confession “insofar as” or “to the extent that” they are scriptural. They appropriate for themselves the right to decide what is and what is not scriptural in the Reformed confession of Scripture. They feel free to disagree. The objective and authentic survey of the confessed doctrine of the Church is put aside to facilitate the subjective preferences and opinions of the individual. With these developments we have once more returned to the struggle and problems of the year 1816 when the matter of those who have “mental reservations” about the confession of the Church became the impetus for changes to the Form of Subscription.

“In 1816 the Form of Subscription of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands underwent a significant change. Office-bearers were then required to accept the confessions of the church not because these accord with the Scriptures, but insofar as they accord with the Scriptures... This seemingly slight change, in effect, destroyed the binding to the confession and proved to be an opening for a multitude of intolerable heresies. Office-bearers were no longer bound to the creeds, but were guided by their own insights and views. While the confession officially still played a role in the church, it had practically ceased to function. Gross liberalism resulted. The Reformed Churches of the First and Second Secessions returned to the Form of Subscription as it was before 1816: accepting the confessions because these accord with the Scriptures.” (a) No room was left

for entertaining doubts, signing the form tongue-in-cheek, or with mental reservations. Signing the Form of Subscription became once more an expression of wholehearted agreement with the confessions.

The Reformed position that not only office-bearers, but all church members are fully bound to the literal text of the accepted doctrinal standards has not been readily accepted outside the Reformed community. The Presbyterians' struggle with the matter of creedal subscription or confessional binding (confessional membership) dates back to the Adopting Act of 1729. The Adopting Act was the result of attempts by the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists to resolve their differing views on the Westminster Standard and so come to union as one American Presbyterian Church. The Presbyterians wanted the Standards to be binding upon the office-bearers, while the Congregationalists only wanted the Standards as non-binding guides. Charles Hodge, in his book "The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the USA", states that the Adopting Act of 1729 "was intended to require of new members nothing more than assent to the essential doctrines of the gospel, and yet the doctrinal standards of the church might be something very different and far higher." We note here, among other things, the use of the words "essential doctrines", and we also note that this distinction will readily accommodate those who would like to decide for themselves what is essential and what is not. Church members are given liberal latitude for all sorts of scruples and mental reservations.

In the book "The Westminster Confession and Creeds", Robert L. Dabney makes a rather revealing statement. "We expressly repudiate the claim of right or authority to dismiss, exclude or expel any person, lay or clerical, from the catholic or universal Church of Christ on the mere ground of his dissent from or rejection of parts of our creed." People are allowed to believe what they like without fear of being dismissed, excluded or expelled from the church; they are free to disagree. We encounter here the ideal climate for all sorts of scruples and mental reservations.

The statements of Charles Hodge and Robert L. Dabney have often been trivialized or summarily dismissed by those who maintain that in the OPC there is wholehearted acceptance of the confessional standards and that the OPC can truly be called a confessional church. A proper reading of the Act of Adoption will confirm quite the opposite and will fully substantiate what Hodge and Dabney stated. The Act contains basically two parts.

The first part reads, "And (we) do therefore agree that all the ministers of this Synod, or that shall hereafter be admitted to this Synod, shall declare their agreement in and approbation of the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster, as being, in all the essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine, and do also adopt the said Confession and Catechisms as the confession of our faith."

The second part of this Act deals with the admission of candidates to the ministry. Such candidates shall declare their "agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession", either by a written or oral declaration. If any candidate or minister has any scruples about any article or articles of these Standards, he shall be allowed such opinions "if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruple or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government."

“So one accepts the ‘system of doctrine’ contained in the Standards, but is not bound to ‘extra-essential and not-necessary points of doctrine.’ In traditional American Presbyterianism, there is certainly no binding to the literal text and all the articles of the adopted Standards.” (b) We are therefore not amiss in questioning the Presbyterian position on confessional binding (confessional membership).

In the progress report of the combined meeting of the Committee for Contact with the OPC (CCOPC) and the Committee on Ecumenicity and Inter-church Relations (CEIR) of February 27, 1990 we read that the OPC members “also question the Canadian Reformed practice of confessional membership...” The fact that the OPC questions confessional membership should not surprise us. Historically Presbyterian churches have not envisioned the people subscribing to the standards in the same way we are committed to the Three Forms of Unity. That is precisely why the issue of confessional membership continues to be a point of contention and debate in our discussions with the OPC. It is therefore not, as was suggested in a number of articles (c), simply a case of some confusion about the decision of 1729 that was resolved in 1736, or that in 1751 certain misrepresentations concerning the constitution, order and discipline of the Presbyterian churches were industriously spread by some members of Dutch congregations... with design to prevent occasional or constant communion of their members with our churches. Nor is the matter of subscription to the confessional standards a matter of a wrong perception that has arisen among us, or a misunderstanding of what Presbyterianism is all about. It is simply the fact that historically, in both the Reformed as well as the Presbyterian churches, there have been continuing struggles on the matter of subscription to the confessional standards. There have always been those, whether Reformed or Presbyterian, who simply do not want to accept the position that all members are or should be fully bound to the literal text of the accepted doctrinal standards. Such a strong binding for all members is generally seen as being unnecessary and undesirable. Why? Because it leaves no room for subjective preferences and personal opinions; no allowances for mental reservations; no freedom to disagree.

When we read the Acts of General Synod 1995 regarding our relationship with the OPC we are informed that “the practices with respect to the admission of guests at the Lord’s table, confessional membership, and contact with the CRC have not been proven to undermine the OPC’s confessional integrity as a true Church.” (p.71, B. 3) Upon reading the address of the fraternal delegate of the OPC, Rev. J.J. Peterson, we get a totally different perspective. He notes that in a number of OPC churches there are many new converts who are Baptists, and then states that “we feel, we cannot, we must not, exclude them from the body of Christ and the sacraments.” (p. 97) Room is made for people who have mental reservations on points of doctrine. These people disapprove of infant baptism and therefore either refuse or neglect to baptize their infant children, but are nevertheless full fledged (confessional) members in the OPC and they are allowed to attend the Lord’s Table. Contrary to Synod’s assertion, these practices bring into question the confessional integrity of the OPC as a true Church. Pastoral concern takes precedence over doctrinal integrity. Gaining and retaining new converts becomes more important than upholding and defending the truth. Church members can subscribe to the Standards and yet retain the freedom to have their mental reservations. They are free to disagree but are nevertheless welcome to the Lord’s Table.

We note that historically the Presbyterian Churches have subscribed to the Standards in as much as they find them to be biblical and not because they are biblical. The profession required of members is less than that required of office-bearers and it is a profession which is not to be judged by the standards of the church. "We find the Presbyterian subscription to the confession 'as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures' rather vague, and the distinction between essential and non-essential articles is equally vague and extremely dangerous. To what extent are Presbyterians really bound to their adopted Standards? Is individual freedom here not being elevated at the cost of true confessional unity?"

We may, as members of the Reformed Churches, speak and write only in accordance with the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions. We may not promote any teaching contrary to this confession. This does not restrict our individual or editorial freedom. For the confessions contain the truth of God's Word, and the Truth makes us free." (d) No room for "mental reservations"! We are not free to disagree! We are all fully bound to the literal text of the accepted doctrinal standards. This binding to the Reformed confession gives us all the freedom we need.

Ron Dykstra

This article makes extensive use of a previous article dated October 27/95, but lays the ground work for future discussions we plan to present. Editors.

(a)(b)(d) Creedal Subscription, Clarence Stam, Reformed Perspective, August/85

(c) Church Membership and Baptism, Clarion, May 5/95

The Subscription Debate, Clarion, August 25/95

REPORT OF THE SYNOD OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

ORGANIZATION

The 253rd annual Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) convened at Ebenezer Reformed Church at Shafter, CA, on Monday evening, May 17, and closed at Grace Reformed Church, Bakersfield, CA, on Thursday evening, May 20, 1999. The RCUS counts its annual synod meetings from 1747, when Rev. Michael Schlatter gathered the first "Coetus" of German Reformed ministers and elders in a meeting held under the authority of the Classis of Amsterdam, Holland. The German Palatinate, where the Heidelberg Catechism was written, was so decimated by the Thirty Years War at the end of the Reformation that the Heidelberg Consistory was not able to mount the mission effort needed to establish a German Reformed Church among its refugees in the New World.

The 253rd Synod was opened with a worship service led by Rev. Vernon Pollema, with Rev. Paul Treick preaching. Roll call showed 30 ministers and 30 elders present. A few more arrived the next day, including Rev. George Syms, who came directly from representing the RCUS at the General Synod of Leusden, of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated). The following morning Rev. Pollema was re-elected president, Rev. Robert Grossmann was elected Vice

President, Rev. Frank Walker was re-elected State Clerk and Elder Clayton Greiman was re-elected Treasurer. The first three officers, along with two elders, also make up the "Executive Committee" which then carries on certain interim functions between synod meetings. Another worship service was held on Wednesday evening, with our newest pastor, Rev. Tom Mayville presiding, and with Rev. Robert Grossmann preaching. Mid-morning devotions were also held each day of the synod with various pastors and candidates leading.

The meetings of the 253rd Synod of the RCUS were visited by representatives of various institutions supported by the denomination. These included representatives of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Greenville Seminary, Westminster Seminary in California, New Geneva Seminary, Hope Haven, a school for disabled children and adults, and Dordt College. Rev. Johinda Gangar, from the United Reformed Churches and Rev. Gary Findley of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church were given privileges of the floor. Rev. Gangar and Rev. Robert Needham, also of the OPC, later addressed the body on behalf of their Churches.

Three new ministers were welcomed to their first Synod meeting. They were Rev. Ron Morris of Mitchell, SD, Rev. Gary Mancilas of Lancaster, CA, and Rev. Tom Mayville of Willows, CA. Rev. Morris was confirmed by synod as a transfer from another denomination. At the same time it was noted that the South Central Classis had lost one congregation and pastor during the past year through schism. The Loveland, CO, congregation had attempted to leave the RCUS secretly after last year's Synod meeting. Its pastor was deposed and the congregation was finally removed from the roll of churches at that spring meeting of Classis. Another pastor was deposed by the Western Classis during the year, also for schismatic activity. A letter of protest was sent to the Reformed Episcopal Church which had received this man without a dismissal from the RCUS and while he was under discipline in our denomination.

MAJOR RESOLUTIONS

Three special committees were scheduled to report recommended actions on important issues before the Church. The Committee on Six-Day Creation presented a booklet of some thirty pages defending

the thesis that the creation days of Genesis 1 were normal days of light and darkness. The Synod reaffirmed an earlier statement to this effect made in 1985. This motion passed unanimously, and 1500 copies of the Committee's report will be printed for distribution among our churches and others who might be interested.

A second special committee was to have reported on proper wording to express the authority that should be given to resolutions and study reports approved by Synod. This Committee was not ready to give a final report, and a substitute motion to approve a statement using the wording of Article 31 of the Church Order of Dordt failed to gain approval. Over the years the RCUS Synod has approved a number of reports dealing with modern issues, such as women in combat, abortion and creation. The question of whether these reports become quasi-creedal statements, or of what quality their authority should consist has been discussed over several years with no suitable wording

adopted as yet. Controversy surrounds using the word “binding” as being too strong a concept for some, while “advice” seems to others to be too mild. The Committee is expected to report again in 2000.

A third special committee had been appointed to provide principles for church unity. This Committee report included five principles of church unity, along with explanation and argumentation for them. The five principles were adopted as follows:

1. In establishing relationships with other churches, there must be a mutual agreement regarding the fundamental nature of the Church, including the three marks of the Church as set forth in the word of God.
2. In pursuing the unity of the visible Church, it must be remembered by all faithful denominations that within the multiformity of the visible Church there is a true uniformity, and that multiformity does not per se obscure the unity of Christ’s Church. Therefore it is not absolutely necessary to unite the visible Church on earth into a single church government by merging all faithful denominations into an organic union (a statement in the report defines “multiformity” for its purposes as: “diversity in the Church... with a true uniformity,” which in the statement includes the “three marks of the Church.” Thus “multiformity” refers only to true churches which exhibit its marks as defined in the Belgic Confession, not to whatever may call itself “church”).
3. When establishing an ecclesiastical relationship with another denomination, the primary consideration is the other Church’s faithfulness to the doctrines of Scripture and practice of the true Christian faith. Ecclesiastical fellowship must never be established with an unfaithful Church.
4. Ecclesiastical unity with other churches may be achieved by entering into a corresponding or fraternal relationship where biblical counsel may be given and received by an exchange of delegates at Presbytery/Classis meetings, as well as at General Assembly/Synod meetings.
5. Organic union with other denominations is desirable if the denominations are separated by unessential differences, and when unity may be accomplished without surrendering biblical and creedal convictions.

MISSIONS

The RCUS continues a strong spiritual and financial interest in missions, both home and foreign. The Synod and Classes of the RCUS now support home mission works in Modesto, CA, Yuba City, CA, Chico, CA, Los Angeles, CA, Watertown, SD, Minneapolis, MN, and Limon and Greeley, CO. The Rapid City, SD, mission work became self-supporting during the past year, and the Sioux Falls, SD, church which became self-supporting in 1998, dedicated a new church building in April of 1999. A pastor for the beginning mission work at Minneapolis, Rev. James Sawtelle, was examined and approved by the Covenant East Classis which met after Synod sessions on May 19. A parsonage for Minneapolis has been purchased by its mother church at Garner, IA, with the help of a loan from the building fund of Synod. Synod also loaned the Karval, CO, Church \$5,000 to make a down payment on a building in Limon (where building prices are somewhat lower than in Minneapolis).

The RCUS continues its foreign mission programs in Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (RDC). The Free Reformed Church of Kenya was founded with the help of RCUS ministers in 1998 among the Kisii people of the equatorial mountains of north Kenya. It now has seven congregations with four completed church service shelters paid for by RCUS mission funds. Literature and medical help are also provided to this church by the RCUS. The Free Reformed Church of Kenya will found a medical clinic in its area during the next year. Malaria is endemic in the area, as well as a number of other tropical diseases. The churches are spread across jungle highlands covering about 200 square miles. Pastoral Elders Meshack Nyarango and James Aunga serve all of the churches with teaching and the sacraments.

The Congo continues to be a hotbed of revolutionary activity with guerrilla activities taking place in the area of the capitol Kinshasa during the past year. This has made the church work and communications there quite difficult. Nevertheless, four churches continue to thrive in the suburbs of Kinshasa. In the south of the Congo, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated), with whom the RCUS works as partners, continues a theological school for ministerial students. Most of the ERCC (Reformed Confessing Church of the Congo) congregations are in this area, which has been much more stable politically in recent months. Eight men will graduate from the theological school this year. The RCUS continues to support various ministers and leading elders for a number of the churches in the Congo.

The RCUS has also been instrumental in the founding of a new international radio mission effort. The Reformed Radio Administration Committee (RRAC), which presently sponsors French language broadcasts aimed at the sixty million French speaking inhabitants of Africa, was founded during the past year with members of the RCUS, the URC and the OPC serving on the Committee. It is hoped to enlist other Reformed churches in supporting and overseeing this work, which we also wish to do in other languages. It is of special interest that the purpose is to follow up on response to radio broadcasts by founding new churches in countries around the world. It is hoped that many ICRC churches will become involved in both supporting the broadcasts and following up on response. This year's RCUS Synod appropriated \$8,000 for support of this radio work.

OTHER BUSINESS

The 253rd Synod of the RCUS continued a number of programs of perennial interest. A committee to produce new Sunday school material reported on its progress. The Publications Committee reported on its activities, including the publication of the Directories of Worship approved at the 1998 Synod in both hard and soft-back form, and in both Traditional and Modern English versions. The Inter-church Relations Committee reported on developments in other conservative Reformed denominations with which the RCUS has, or is working toward, fraternal relations. It also reported on the work of NAPARC and the ICRC (International Conference of Reformed Churches). As part of its dealing with theological education, the Synod voted support for ten students for the ministry studying at several institutions which have been approved by previous synods. It also voted a new "guideline for giving" (a recommended annual amount per communicant member) of \$2.00 for

New Geneva Seminary in Colorado Springs, CO, and dropped the similar guideline for Westminster Seminary in CA.

A perennial concern for RCUS synods is diaconal support for retired ministers and their widows. The RCUS synod spends about 1/3 of its \$300,000 annual budget on this cause, providing help for five ministers and five widows. Only one retired minister does not receive help from this fund. We also are trying to build up a capital fund to help offset future costs with earned income. This fund has risen above \$300,000, and the church sets aside about \$18,000 per year for this fund. The goal is to have \$1 million invested before beginning to use the fund's earnings.

The 253rd Synod of the RCUS was carried on in a cordial atmosphere provided by the host congregations, which are about 25 miles apart. Debate was very occasionally sharp, but never rancorous, and the fellowship of officers in the RCUS continues to be very close and sweet. As usual, the food was excellent with two Cal-Tex-Mex barbecues provided by the Shafter congregation, and Italian as well as American dishes provided at Bakersfield. A very accomplished young lady, Sunny Saavalainen, provided sign-language interpretation for her father, Rev. Jari Saavalainen, pastor of Deaf Reformed Church of Bowie, MD. While no invitation for the 254th Synod was at hand in California, the denomination's largest Congregation, St. Paul's Evangelical Reformed Church at Hamburg, MN, has since decided to invite Synod next year.

The RCUS looks forward to the Third Millennium since Christ's earthly ministry in full confidence that God will richly bless those who earnestly contend for the Faith and who hold faithfully to the teaching of His infallible and inerrant word, the Holy Bible. Whether the Lord comes soon or tarries long from a human perspective, the future belongs to those who trust His word.

From the Christian Observer

LORD'S DAY ONE

The first Lord's Day serves as an introduction to the Catechism. The Catechism, in turn, serves as an introduction to and a summary of God's Holy Word. For this reason we can say that the first Lord's Day is one which sums up the whole gospel. The Catechism is the message of the gospel in a nutshell.

If this is what the Catechism does, then why does the Catechism speak about comfort? Why doesn't the first question read: "What is the summary of the Bible's message?"

In the first place, we should realise that one of the purposes of the gospel is to give us comfort. In Romans 15:4 we read that the Bible is not only meant to instruct us, but also to encourage and comfort us by giving us hope. "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." The Bible is therefore a book of comfort. The Catechism reflects this purpose of Scripture, for it, too, endeavours to give us comfort.

Furthermore, the time in which the Catechism was written also gives us a clue to why it begins with a reference to our comfort. The greatest jewel of the Reformation was the comfort which the church had long lost because of doctrinal heresy. As long as God's children were burdened with the doctrine of "work salvation" (earning your salvation by means of your good works), they had no real comfort, no rest for their souls. For just as we know today, so the genuine children of God knew then how great their sins were. They also knew how great God's demand is, which they could never fulfil because of their sinfulness. They knew that if salvation depended upon their own works, they could never have real assurance of their salvation, for they could never be sure whether they had done enough to be saved. Thus they could never have comfort or rest for their souls.

Another reason lies in the political and religious climate of the time. The early years of the Reformation were times of persecution. That was especially true for the Huguenots in France, many of whom lost their lives because of their faith. The news of this persecution would reach the ears of all the Reformed. How fitting for Ursinus and Olevianus to begin with a word of comfort in such trying times.

How do we define "comfort?" Comfort is the peace of mind that arises out of God's promised mercy, which eases fear, anxiety and sorrow. What causes this fear in us? What arouses this anxiety? From where does this sorrow arise? From our fall into sin! Our sin arouses the wrath of our holy and jealous God. And the consuming wrath of God makes us tremble in fear. Furthermore, our sin is punished with God's curse. And the effects of this curse, such as pain, sickness and death, all give birth to sorrow.

As we mentioned in our definition, comfort arises from the mercy of God. That is clear from Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:3, where Paul describes God as "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort." The only source of comfort lies in the mercy of God which He has shown to us in Christ Jesus. That is why the Catechism says, "What is your only comfort?" There is no other comfort than that which comes from our gracious God, through the forgiveness of our sins and the righteousness of Christ. In Isaiah 40:1, we read "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" says your God. "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned." Israel's comfort was based on God's promise that her punishment would come to an end, because God would pardon her sins.

The unbeliever who is ignorant or who rejects the comfort that arises from God's grace looks for another source of comfort. Nevertheless, the most they can find in this life is some temporary respite from the miserable consequences of sin. They might be able to amass some wealth, so that they can enjoy some physical comforts, such as a nice home and good food. They do not have the discomfort of being left out in the cold, nor the discomfort of hunger pains. They might be able to make advancements in medicine, which alleviate some of the pain and suffering which man would otherwise experience. Yet such "comforts" only affect the outward body. The believer, however, enjoys peace of mind. His soul is quieted within him.

The Catechism describes our comfort as belonging to Jesus Christ. What does it mean to belong to Jesus Christ? It means that we become His responsibility. He has made Himself our Saviour, our Redeemer, our Protector, our Provider. One might compare it to a child. In a room full of children someone might ask a mother, "Which child belongs to you?" Parents have the responsibility to

provide for their children's needs, to guide them and protect them from harm, to look out for their well being. The life of an orphan in a third world country where there is poverty and famine is not a good life. He does not belong to anyone. Yet he is not able to stand on his own and provide for himself. Can you imagine what joy he would feel if he were adopted by loving parents who could provide him with what he needed for life? How comforting it would be for him to know that he belonged to someone, that someone was willing to be responsible for his life, his well being. That is what it means to belong to Jesus Christ. We were like orphans or worse! We had sold ourselves to Satan through sin. We had become his children. Yet Satan did not seek our well being; he sought our ruin. How wonderful to belong to Jesus Christ!

The Catechism says that I belong with body and soul to Jesus Christ. That means that I belong completely to Him. All of me belongs to Christ. Not just my soul is His, but also my body. He owns me completely, totally. Paul wrote, "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's," (1 Cor 6:19, 20).

Then the Catechism says that I am His in life and in death. This means that I belong to Him always. I don't belong to Christ just in this life. Even when I die I still belong to Christ. In every situation, at all times, I belong to my Redeemer. Nothing can separate me from Him. Paul wrote, "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord," (Rom 8:38,39).

Since we belong to Christ, we are brought into a special relationship with the Father. The Catechism speaks about "my Heavenly Father." On account of what Christ has done, the Father adopts us again as His children. That means that we are now under the care of our heavenly Father. He will look out for our good. Not a hair can fall from our head without our Father's will. And even if it sometimes seems as though evil things happen to us, yet we may be sure that everything that happens to us is working towards our salvation, even if we cannot understand how that is possible. God is much wiser than we are.

How does one come to belong to Christ? Christ bought us. He paid the price of our sins. Not with gold or silver, but with His precious blood. He bought us through His suffering and death. That was the price that had to be paid in order to release us from the bondage to sin and death. And now that Christ has released us, He continues to watch over us lest we should come under bondage to sin again. For Satan tries to gain power over us, wanting to enslave us as before. Yet Christ preserves us and will not allow us to come under Satan's dominion again. He will cause us to persevere and to remain faithful to the end.

Belonging to Jesus Christ does not mean that we are free in the sense of being able to do whatever pleases us. "I am not my own," says the Catechism. We are free from the grip of the devil, and we belong to Christ. Satan once ruled us, but now we are ruled by Christ. He rules us by His Word and Spirit. Now we must do what He tells us to do. We must obey Him. He is our Lord, our Master, (cf. Rom 6:15-23).

Of ourselves we are not willing to do so. By nature we are rebellious and we want to do our own will. And our sinful nature can alarm us. Will we submit ourselves to Christ's rule? But here, too, we are comforted. For Christ promises to work in our hearts with His Holy Spirit, so that we are heartily willing and ready to obey Him. As Paul wrote, "for it is God who works in you both to will and to do [or work] for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13).

In order to experience the comfort of belonging to Christ, it is necessary for us to know three things.

1. We must come to know how great our sins and misery are. There is no comfort in the knowledge of our sin and misery itself. It only makes us feel very bad about ourselves. The knowledge of our sin and misery only serves to frighten us. Yet this knowledge is necessary, for it incites us to look for healing. Unless we know that we are sick, we seldom go to a doctor. In like manner, no one will look for redemption from sin and misery unless he first comes to know his sin and misery.

The Catechism says that we have to learn how great our sins and misery are. We do not go running to a doctor if we have a cold or some other minor ailment. We only go if we have something quite serious, and something that won't go away by itself. This is what the Catechism will teach us: that our sin is very great. It will lead to eternal death. Furthermore, the Catechism will teach us that our "ailment" will not go away by itself, or by our ministrations. We need a spiritual physician.

2. It is no comfort to know that we are horribly sick and are going to die. In fact, some doctors are reluctant to tell their patients how serious their illness is if there is no cure. For this knowledge won't benefit them. In some ways, ignorance is bliss. The only time that such knowledge would really be of any benefit is when there is a cure. It is the same with our knowledge of our sin and misery. If there was no forgiveness of sins and no redemption, then we could just as well remain ignorant about our spiritual condition. Yet if there is a cure, we want to be told about our disease so that we might go to the physician who can heal us. Thus the knowledge of how great our sins and misery are will only be of comfort to us if we at the same time are told of the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. Thus the second aspect of that knowledge, which is necessary to have as comfort, is the knowledge of the deliverance, which is in Christ Jesus our LORD.

3. The Catechism says that our comfort also hinges on the knowledge of how we are to show ourselves thankful for such deliverance. The reason is quite simple. We who have been redeemed by grace, desire and are obliged to work for God's good pleasure. We must and we want to walk in obedience. Why? For two reasons:

a) First, we show our gratitude to God when we do His will. And this gratitude is necessary to please God. God is angry with those who show their ingratitude by walking in sin, and those who walk in sin lose, the sense of God's favour.

b) Second, our good works also assure us of our salvation. Our acts of gratitude are proof that the Spirit of God is working in us the new life that we have received through the death and resurrection of Christ.

Rev. A. Van Delden

Dear Editors:

Re: Outside of the church there is no salvation.

The explanation of this phrase from Article 28 Belgic Confession in the June 1/99 issue of Reformed Polemics was not, in my view, entirely convincing. In his explanation, Rev. I de Wolff states that no one wants to draw the conclusion that salvation is dependent on church membership so that whoever has not joined the true church is lost. To avoid this conclusion Rev. de Wolff finds a solution to the paradox by making a distinction between salvation and being saved. However, by doing this the clear teaching of the confession is made unnecessarily complex. I agree with Rev. de Wolff that we should understand the confession literally. But then we need to explain the expression by going to the scripture which it points to. The Westminster Confession also expresses itself in a similar fashion. In Chapter 25 point 2 it reads:

“The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

It is significant that both the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession make reference to the same proof text - Acts 2:47. This text tells us what the confession means. It reads: “...And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” (NKJV - see footnote)

Although joining the church is outwardly an act of man, the scriptures are clear that it is one hundred percent the act of God. The Lord adds to His church according to His predetermined plan (John 10:16). He draws them in (John 6:44). The confession states clearly that the church is the assembly of the redeemed. It is all those who profess the true religion and their children.

This universal church is not identified as any single ecclesiastical organization. It is the one body of true churches spread throughout the world. Those who are being saved are added to this church just like they were in Jerusalem after Pentecost. John Calvin writes in his Institutes (IV.i.10): “For by its ministry and labor God willed to have the preaching of his Word kept pure and to show himself the Father of a family, while he feeds us with spiritual food and provides everything that makes for our salvation.”

Of those who refuse to be joined with the church Calvin writes:

“For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments.” Further in the same section he writes that “separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ.”

In conclusion, I don't believe the terms salvation and being saved should be separated. Being saved and being in the church are closely linked. As Christ answered when asked about who would be saved: “Strive to enter through the narrow gate.” (Luke 13:23-24)

Yours in Christ, Rick Duker

Footnote: This is the reading of the Traditional Greek Text upon which the Reformed confessions are based. Unfortunately, the critical Revised Greek Text found in most Bibles omits the words “to the church.”