

## ***The Holy Catholic Church***

Scripture Readings: Matthew 16:13-20; Ephesians 4:1-6

Trinity CRC, October 22, 2017PM

Evening Reformation Themes for 500 Anniv. – IV

**Belgic Conf. Art. 27&28**

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Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Church unity is important. Jesus prayed for it in John 17. The Apostles who wrote the New Testament also called for unity and wrote against schismatic activity. Even Martin Luther was concerned about the unity of the church. He did not want to split the Roman Catholic Church, as some suggest. Rather, as I think the video tonight showed us, Luther wanted to reform the church, to call out error—very clearly and albeit sometimes too forcefully perhaps. It seem unlikely that he wanted a new denomination. Rather, he wanted theological correction within the existing church of his day, which was pretty much the only denomination in western Europe at the time. Some of his hard talk—like the claiming to be a Hussite—set him sharply against the established church and may not have served the cause of meaningful dialogue. In fairness, however, it seems that the pope and other leaders of the day were more interested in maintaining their positions of power and influence and wealth than about being biblically correct.

So we get a reformation that begins among protesting people in the church, who come to be called protest-ants, from which we get the word Protestant. That refers to all non-Roman Catholic Churches, initially in Western Europe. The Orthodox Churches had split from the Roman Catholic Church 500 years earlier and were mostly in Eastern Europe and Africa. So as the Protestants got more organized, they quite quickly began to formulate statements that reflected the Bible's teaching on things like The Holy Catholic Church. So the Heidelberg Catechism has one Lord's Day (#21) on the church. But this evening, we'll look at two of the articles of the Belgic Confession dealing with the church, written 50 years after Luther's 95 theses were first published.

Articles 27 & 28 of the Belgic Confession pick up on the world-wide character of the church. We call this doctrine the catholicity of the church. One of my professors years ago once spoke for over an hour on the Catholicity of the Church. It was probably the most boring lecture I've ever heard so I hope this sermon is not the same 😊. The doctrine of the Catholicity of the Church means that the church is made up of believers all over the world. That's what we confess in the Apostles' Creed. I believe a holy catholic church. Don't be confused by that word catholic. It is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church. It simply refers to the fact that the Church is found all over the world. It is universal.

BC Article 27 opens saying, *There is one single catholic or universal church—a holy congregation and gathering of true believers...* And it ends:

*And so this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain persons. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.*

This reference to faith gets at the heart of the church. The church in essence is made up of true believers. And Luther would have argued that if you are believer, you also believe what the Bible says—not only about Jesus and salvation but about how we govern and form the church. In catechism classes we make distinctions to help us better understand this truth. Recognizing that some people may be members of a church here on earth but not Christians, we want to consider first of all a distinction between the visible church and the invisible church.

## The Invisible Church

The invisible church sounds like something magic. But it's not a trick. In comparison, the visible church is what you and I see. It's all the people who come to worship services and whose names are on the church membership lists. But just as Jesus talked about sheep and goats and as Paul writes in Romans 11 about branches being cut off and others being grafted on to the root, so we recognize that, when it comes to the church, not everyone who appears to be connected really is. People may be part of the visible church; we see them coming in and out of a church building. But unless there is true faith we are not part of the *invisible* church. Membership in the invisible church means your name is written in the Lamb's book of life because you believe in Jesus Christ as your one and only Saviour. Faith in Jesus is what makes you a member. This became a strong teaching in the reformation era since it was felt that many in the Roman Church were simply going through the motions but had no real relationship, no genuine connection, to the Lord Jesus.

This is the Church Jesus talked about in Matthew 16 when he asked one of the disciples,

*MT 16:15 "But what about you?... Who do you say I am?"*

*MT 16:16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

*MT 16:17 Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*

In the official Roman Catholic dogma, the Church, on the basis of this text, is said to be built on Peter who Jesus calls the rock on which the church is built. Each pope is considered to be a representative of Peter, or his successor. And therefore all people must be connected to that church where Peter is the head in order to be saved. It didn't have so much to do with faith as with physical connection, including receiving the Eucharist, which again, is a physical connection to the body of Christ—a sermon for another day.

Protestants don't agree with this today any more than we did at the time of the Reformation. We say that Peter's confession is the rock on which the church is built. In other words, when Peter said to Jesus, *You are the Christ the Son of the living God*, Jesus responded saying, in effect, that Peter's confession must come from the heart of those who are really members of the invisible church. In other words, you're not saved just because you belong to an organization called a church—whether its Trinity CRC, St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church or the Lutheran Church. You are

saved because you belong to Jesus whom you confess to be the Christ, the Son of the living God! He is the Rock. He is the head of the church. He is the gate by which we come in.

Do you follow that?

True members of the Church of Jesus Christ are believers. They have faith in Jesus Christ. He is the One around whom they gather and whom they gather to worship and serve daily. It is this common faith in Jesus that glues us together as believers, regardless of who we are, where we live or the congregation we are a part of here on earth.

## **Church Divisions**

Secondly, when we consider the catholicity of the Church, we must talk about the problem of divisions. Sadly, we too often let our differences divide us rather than our common faith in Jesus unite us. Reports say there are over 40,000 denominations in the world today. Possibly higher than that because it's a very tough to define a denomination in the church climate of our world today. So needless to say, there are many divisions in the church of Jesus Christ.

Years ago—I think it was 1996 or 7—I attended a huge Promise Keepers Pastor's conference in Atlanta, Georgia. It was an amazing experience to sing with 40,000 people. The popular Christian pastor and author, Max Lucado, spoke on the theme of the unity and catholicity of the church. If you know Max, then you know that he is an artist with words. I don't recall his exact words but he opened his speech referring to the church as a big ship. And on this ship many different groups are gathered. There are some who live very rigid, disciplined—if not legalistic—lives. And for that reason, they gather on that part of the ship known as the STERN. There are others who have very few rules, who talk about the Spirit all of the time and are the ones we would expect to find climbing up and down the MAST. And then there are people who are very devout and worshipful who gather at the BOW.

He continued saying, "Divisions on the ship are so bad that one group refuses to acknowledge that another is on the ship at times." And we've probably all known people who hold to that kind of belief. All we can say to that is that they may be in for a big surprise when they get to heaven! It is well and very good for us to be concerned about our own orthodoxy and even the orthodoxy of churches around the globe, but we don't further the cause of unity and catholicity by name-calling or by saying we are the true church and you aren't. Catholicity and unity are important doctrines. We cannot just take them for granted and we cannot ignore them by saying we are the only one. Like in a marriage, we must work at it.

The word catholicity is not exactly a thrilling one. When I think back to that speech I mentioned a while ago, I don't think very many people understood what the professor was getting at. That's sad because what catholicity stands for is actually very exciting. I believe it's an important part of our witness to the world, especially when people from the outside look at us and see so many denominations. That's

why we should do what we can to stand together. I was delighted yesterday to attend the funeral of the pastor's wife from Solid Rock Church, across from us on Fort Rd. It was, as you can well imagine, a very sad occasion but it was marked by support from a multitude of churches around the city.

When you recognize that God works in many different lands, languages and nations—not to mention denominations—then you know that you can learn from other Christians on the other side of the globe and around our city. Catholicity requires that we see the bigger picture. The Holy Spirit is one and the same in Churches of Africa and Asia and in Canada. African brothers and sisters may respond to God in different ways than Anglos do. The content of worship is much the same when people are worshipping Jesus, but the exact expression of it may differ due to culture and historical influences. In addition, because some believers live in a different situation—sometimes a culture that is closer to that of the Bible times—certain passages of the Bible may speak more clearly to them than they do to us in the western world. Consequently, we are able to gain insights from them just as they are able to learn from us. We may be separated by many miles but, as Article 27 says, *we are still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.*

That's so refreshing to hear from our confession which is 450 years old!

So when we think about the church we should remember that it is much bigger than Trinity CRC or the CRC as a whole. It is one holy congregation made up of true believers all over the world. Christians far and wide believe in one holy catholic church. In all places our mighty God is gathering his people together and they are gathering together—as we are tonight—to worship him with hearts of praise and gratitude.

### **Membership Obligations**

Now we also need to move on to discuss, thirdly, the obligations of membership in this catholic church. Listen how Article 28 begins.

*We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it, no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition.*

Those who define themselves as the true church really like passages in our confessions like this one. But we must remember what was said earlier about membership in the invisible church. People who have true faith in Jesus are members of the universal or catholic church. They don't need to belong to that denomination which claims to have a pope directly in line with Peter nor in any denomination that believes itself to be the only true church.

You must be a member the Church of Jesus Christ. And this universal Church is manifested in different denominations here on earth, whether for bad or good we won't discuss right now. It simply is that way. The Lord Jesus is the head of his Church and therefore is the head of every group of believers called a church that

looks to him in faith. Let us remain humble, remembering that Jesus claimed to be present where two or three were gathered in his name.

In the NT, the church is referred to as the body of Christ. Each of us is a different part of the church but all the parts are important. Jesus doesn't want Lone Rangers in the church because the church is a body of believers united together by a common confession. As we read from Ephesians 4:

*Eph 4:4 There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called-- <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Rather than see ourselves as individual Lone Ranger Christians, we must see ourselves as parts of the body of Christ. We're like different pieces in a puzzle that together are complete and beautiful but alone are incomplete. I bought a used DVD player, and it didn't work at first. But after playing around with it for a while, a piece of child's puzzle came out. Now, that one puzzle piece is pretty much useless, aside from jamming the DVD player. But with the rest of the puzzle, it makes a complete and beautiful picture. Similarly, we are like the various patches of a quilt that alone don't do much but together make a gorgeous covering as well as providing warmth. Or think all the members of a team working together to bring home a trophy or gold medal. As part of a team, you must work with your other teammates to help everyone be their best.

That's why the Belgic Confession can state so boldly that those who confess Jesus are members of the invisible church, and are therefore obliged to join and unite with the church here on earth. Only by belonging to a visible community of faith can individuals truly know the joy of being a part of Christ's body and at the same time show the world what the church is. If believers don't visibly join together in this world, they do not show the world how Christ unites us and blesses us in our unity. Our disobedience makes it hard for unbelievers to see that we are many parts of one body working in harmony to bring glory to our Head, Jesus Christ.

To fail to join together with other Christians would be like me saying that my wife Patsy and our children are part of my family but in reality we have nothing to do with each other. We have the same last name but that's where our unity stops. People would be hard-pressed to believe that we are a family if we lived like that. And likewise, since the word *church*, whenever it is used in the NT refers to people (not buildings), the use of that word in the Bible assumes that people will join together and present a united witness to Jesus Christ.

To be a Christian all by yourself, if not disobedient to God, is certainly spiritually unhealthy. Being united together is for the good of all concerned. The Belgic Confession Article 28 teaches us that as individuals we submit to the church's instruction and discipline. We benefit from learning together and when one of us goes wrong, the rest of us call him or her back. Therefore Article 28 also says that *we bend our necks together under the yoke of Jesus Christ.*

In other words, together we learn what it means to be Christ's disciple—to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him. That is impossible to do alone. We need support, encouragement and accountability. In short, we need love from others.

And finally, when we think about the obligations of church membership, we read that

*we join together in order to build each other up.*

We all have different gifts to use in ministering to each other. To hoard those gifts hurts the body. Plus, it robs yourself of many blessing that can be experienced in ministering to each other. Time and again as a pastor I hear people say that they get so much out of it when they give of themselves to the church. They share their musical gifts and they are blessed in return. They share their time by going to visit someone who is shutin and they come away feeling like they received more than they gave. Elders and deacons visiting people come away feeling like they received more than they gave.

So church membership is a two way street. We each bring our own individual strengths and spiritual gifts to the church, but the church provides each of us with spiritual nurture and protection; it provides us fellowship and encouragement in our walk with Christ. And it gives us a place to use our God-given gifts and to grow them. So in these ways the church helps make each of us stronger. And the church herself becomes stronger as well.

For these reasons, the Scriptures urge us to join the visible church here on earth. To fail to do so would be to rob God of glory that would come to him as you use your gifts for the good of the whole body. And it will also rob you of the strength you receive from the larger body of believers as well as the accountability that the church provides for you to keep you walking on the narrow path that leads to life. For reasons like these, Article 28 tells us, at the end, that

*to withdraw from the church or not to join it, is to act contrary to God's commands.*

In conclusion, dear friends, you should think about this: Are you thankful to God for calling you into the church? What a blessing to know that you are not alone! And what a blessing we stand to receive from doing our part in the body of believers! As we embrace the catholicity and unity of the church as a gift from Jesus our Saviour and Lord, we all find our place in the church, find great joy in serving Jesus in his Church and in that way we bring more glory to the Head of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ.