

LORD'S DAY 21

THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

54. Q. What do you believe
Concerning the *holy catholic Christian church*?

A. I believe that the Son of God,¹
out of the whole human race,²
from the beginning of the world to its end,³
gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself,⁴
by His Spirit and Word,⁵
in the unity of the true faith,⁶
a church chosen to everlasting life.⁷
And I believe that I am⁸
and forever shall remain
a living member of it.⁹

1. **John 10:11** I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

Acts 20:28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Ephesians 4:11-13 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³ till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...

Colossians 1:18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

2. **Genesis 26:4** And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed....

Revelation 5:9 And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation..."

3. **Isaiah 59:21** "As for Me," says the LORD, "this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants' descendants," says the LORD, "from this time and forevermore."

1 Corinthians 11:26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

4. **Psalms 129:1-5** Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth," let Israel now say; ² "Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; yet they have not prevailed against me. ³ The plowers plowed

on my back; they made their furrows long." ⁴ The LORD is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked. ⁵ Let all those who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back.

Matthew 16:18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

John 10:28-30 "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. ³⁰ I and My Father are one."

5. **Romans 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

Romans 10:14-17 How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ¹⁵ And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!" ¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" ¹⁷ So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

Ephesians 5:26 ...that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word...

Acts 2:42-47 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³ Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having

favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

Ephesians 4:1-6 I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, ² with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, ³ endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

7. **Romans 8:29** For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Ephesians 1:3-14 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, ⁴ just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, ⁵ having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved. ⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace ⁸ which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, ⁹ having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, ¹⁰ that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth- in Him. ¹¹ In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, ¹² that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. ¹³ In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also,

having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

8. **1 John 3:14** We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

1 John 3:19-21 And by this we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him. ²⁰ For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. ²¹ Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.

9. **Psalm 23:6** Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

John 10:27,28 "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ²⁸ And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand"

1 Corinthians 1:4-9 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, ⁵ that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, ⁶ even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷ so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Peter 1:3-5 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵ who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.



In the Apostles' Creed we confess the following: "I believe a holy catholic Christian church." Let us look at each of these words separately.

The first word that describes the church is the word "holy." "**Holy**" means *to be set apart, consecrated to God*. When we say that the church is holy, we mean that God has set apart His people to be a distinct people on this earth. They are distinguished from unbelievers and people who live in sin. They receive the sign and seal of God's ownership (baptism). Out of

thankfulness for this privilege of being members of Christ's holy church, we are to be holy in all our conduct, that is, we are to set ourselves apart from sin and evil.

The second word that describes the church is the word "catholic." The church of Rome claims that she is the "catholic" church, and sometimes we distinguish Catholics and Reformed. Yet that is not a good distinction. For the Reformed Church is the catholic church, whereas the Roman Church is not catholic.

What does “catholic” mean, and why do we call ourselves the “catholic church?” “**Catholic**” means “**universal, encompassing the whole.**” In what sense is it universal? What does it encompass?

The church of Christ is “catholic” or “universal” in three respects.

1. **geographical** - it encompasses the whole human race. The church is not limited to Israel, the Netherlands or America. The church is gathered from all peoples, tongues and races.

2. **temporal** - it encompasses the whole of time. The church exists from the beginning of time to the end thereof. There is never a time when the church fails to exist.

3. **doctrinal** - it encompasses the whole truth. Christ gathers this church in the unity of the true faith. The church of Christ hears the voice of the Good Shepherd, but does not listen to the voice of any other. One of the marks of the true church (which are found in Art 29 of the Belgic Confession) is that the Word of God is faithfully preached. This means that the church believes all the truth and only the truth. It rejects all things contrary to the Word of God.

The third word that describes the church is the word “**Christian.**” This word was not added into the Creed until the time of the Reformation. It is for this reason that not all churches which confess the Apostles’ Creed, have this word to describe the Church. This word “Christian” shows the basis upon which the church is built. Christ is the cornerstone and foundation of the church. The existence of the church rests upon His gracious work.

The last word to be defined is the word “**church**” itself. This word is taken from the Greek word *KURIAKOS* which means

“**belonging to the Lord.**” It is from this Greek word that the word *church* is derived in various languages - *kirk kerk, kirche, church*).

From the Catechism we learn that the church is universal, uniform and unified.

The Church is Universal

Since we are discussing the doctrine of the church, we would do well to listen to a definition of what the church is. We confess in Art 27 of the Belgic Confession that the church “*is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.*”

The author of these words said elsewhere, “*There is only one church, which is the gathering of all the elect who were from the beginning of time and will be to the end thereof.*”¹

Olevianus wrote, “*There is one universal church, just as there is one Head of the church, namely, Jesus Christ, and because all believers from Adam to the end of the world are His members and are one body through the Holy Spirit.*”²

Ursinus spoke about “*an invisible universal church which is the assembly of all the elect through the ages.*”³

Concerning the church Calvin wrote, “*All the elect are so united in Christ that as they are dependent upon one Head, so they grow into one body, joined and knit together as are the limbs of a body.*”⁴

In all these quotations you see one common feature: the connection between God’s sovereign decree of election and the universal church. And that is a connection that the Reformers based on the Scriptures. They refer us to John 10:

¹ Guido de Brès, *Le Baston de la Foy Chrestienne* as quoted by C. Vonk, *De Voorzeide Leer*, Drukkerij Barendrecht, 1956, p.91.

² Casper Olevianus, *De Vaste Grond*, De Vuurtoren, Urk, 1980, p. 148.

³ Zacharius Ursinus, *The Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co. n.d., p. 287.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Westminster Press, 1960, vol. 2, p. 1014.

14, 16, where we read, “*I am the good Shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd.*” Christ speaks about “My” sheep. These are the elect, which the Father has given Him. Christ brings all the elect together into one fold.

God’s decree of election does not automatically make the elect, members of Christ’s church. Covenant children, whose parents belong to the church, also belong to the church and are members of it by birth.⁵ They are received into the church and grafted into it by way of baptism.⁶ Adults who join the church become members of it when they make confession of faith and are baptised.

As a result, we cannot say that all the elect are already members of Christ’s church. We must not view the church of Christ in a static way, as if it is complete and unchanging. We must realise that Christ’s work of church gathering is not yet complete. It is a process that occurs through the ages and will become complete only at the end of the ages. Only then does the Church Universal reach its fullness and perfection. Only at the end of the ages will all the elect be gathered in. It is important to realise that the Universal Church is not yet what it will be at the close of the age. The church is *being* gathered.

That the church is being gathered comes out clearly in what Christ says in John 11:52: Christ “*would die for the nation [of Israel], and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.*”

Knowing this fact allows us to speak about the Universal Church in two ways. We may speak about the Universal Church as it now exists. And we may speak about the church as it will exist at the end of the age, when Christ returns.

It is the latter view that the Reformers had in mind when they described the Universal Church. They spoke of the church as it will be, the gathering of all the elect through all the ages.

It is good to pay attention to this time distinction, for some have confused the future with the present.

Some believe that all the elect belong to the church now already. And since faith is the fruit of election, some have said that all believers belong to the church now already, as it exists today. They realise, however, that all true believers do not belong to a true church. There are believers who are members of false churches. Yet they say that they are members of Christ’s church. Which church? Certainly not any true visible church on earth! Therefore they invent a church, an invisible church. A true believer, they say, who is a member of a false visible church is still a member of the invisible church.

Scripture never speaks about an invisible church. In the land of the living there is only one church now, and that is the Universal Church, which is visible in many localities and which all display the three marks of the true church (cf. Art 29, Belgic Confession)

It is not in harmony with either Scripture or confession to say, then, that all the elect, i.e. all true believers are already members of the church. Christ spoke in another way. He said, “*Other sheep have I that are not of this fold. Them also I must bring in.*” (John 10:16) The fold is not yet complete.

Why is it not complete? For a number of reasons. In the first place, all the elect have not yet been born. Many names that God has written in His book of life have not yet come into existence. They will come to life, and they will join the church. Yet we cannot speak about those belonging to the church who do not yet exist.

⁵ Heid. Cat. Q/A 74 & Question #1 in the Form for Baptism.

⁶ Bel. Conf. Art 34 and Heid. Cat. Q/A74).

Furthermore, the Universal Church is not yet complete because there are some who have not yet heard or responded to the call of the gospel. Some of the elect have not yet come to faith.

Still further, there are some elect who have come to faith, but who live in disobedience to Christ's call. They resist Christ's church-gathering work. For whatever reason, they refuse to separate themselves from the false church. Perhaps they have not understood the truth well enough. Perhaps there are certain consequences to joining the church that they are not ready to accept. Perhaps a marriage would be threatened; perhaps a job would be lost. Through weakness of faith, some true believers resist Christ's church-gathering work. I think of Nicodemus, who did not approach Christ openly for fear of the Jews. It would appear from Scripture that he did not join the group of disciples until after Christ died. Only then did he openly declare his sentiments for Christ.

Those believers who refuse to join themselves to the true church cannot rightly be said to belong to the Universal Church. They ought to be exhorted, for they act contrary to the ordinance of God.

Will those be condemned who failed to join Christ's church on earth, though they were joined to Christ by faith? No. In this life there is much weakness and shortcoming amongst all believers. This is also true in the area of Christ's church gathering work. At the time of their death, Christ will take these true believers to Himself. That, too, is a part of Christ's church gathering work. Although in this life they resisted Christ's church gathering work, their sinful resistance is ended at death, and they become members of the Universal Church by being added to the assembly of all believers in heaven.

There is another reason why the Universal Church here on earth is not perfect yet. In the church hypocrites are mixed with true believers. In this life their hypocrisy might go undetected. Yet when they pass through the portal of death, they will

not be admitted into the assembly of the saints in heaven. Their hypocrisy will be exposed, and they will be judged for their unbelief.

Furthermore, the Universal Church is imperfect because the sanctification of the believers is not yet complete. The church of Christ is made up of men who are still beset with great weaknesses.

It should be clear that the Universal Church as it is today, is not what it shall be when Christ returns. Then it will be complete. Then all the elect will belong to it, and only the elect. It is this Universal Church in all perfection and completion, which the Reformers had in mind when they spoke as they did. This is the church as God sees it.

The Church is Uniform

The Catechism says that the church is *united in the true faith*. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that there is one church. This is the Universal Church. Then Paul goes on to say that there is one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.

There is one Spirit, one faith. Paul says this in the context of exhorting the Ephesians to unity in doctrine and conduct. We believe that the Spirit speaks to the churches through the preaching of the Word. "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*" (Revelation 2:29).

Where there is a plurality of people, there is often a plurality of thoughts. One thinks this, and another that. One would follow a certain course, while another would follow a different course. Yet there is one Spirit Who speaks to the church. There is one Spirit Who guides the church in all the truth. And there is one Spirit Who has inspired the Scriptures. The one Spirit speaks a uniform word to the churches today. Wherever the Spirit leads men, they proclaim one and the same message. The truth is uniform. There is one faith.

This uniformity of the gospel message induced the Reformers to acknowledge

the pure preaching of God's Word as the first mark of the Universal Church on earth now. The church of all ages has been and continues to be led by the one and the same gospel.

So Paul could say, *"I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed."*

The same must be said concerning the sacraments. There is only one baptism, says Paul. By extension, we could say that there is only one Lord's Supper. Wherever the Spirit leads men to administer the sacraments, it will be done uniformly. Oh, some minor difference may appear. One will dip his hand three times into the baptismal font, while the other does it once. One may baptise with immersion and another with sprinkling. Such minor differences in the administration will also appear in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Spirit does not dictate these finer points. However, the Spirit guides men in the interpretation of the sacraments, and in determining who will be allowed to receive the sacraments. Thus the true church will be recognised by the mark of the pure administration of the sacraments.

What is true for the preaching and the sacraments is also true for the exercising of church discipline. In the Scriptures, the Spirit has dictated the manner in which church discipline is to be exercised. The Universal Church has always followed and continues to follow that form faithfully. Thus the true church will be recognised by the mark of the faithful exercising of discipline.

The Universal Church has one form, the form laid down in the Word of God. The church has one form because there is one norm, the Scriptures. It has one form, because it has one Head, Jesus Christ, and one Spirit to lead it.

The church that deviates from the norm of God's Word with respect to preaching, sacraments or church discipline ceases to possess the true form of the church. It becomes false.

We stress the fact that the church is *uniform* because there are some who teach that the church is *pluriform*, that is, the church comes in all shapes, colours and sizes, all of which form a part of the true church. The doctrine of pluriformity teaches that the Baptist Church, the Church of Christ, the Assemblies of God, the Reformed Church and the Free Reformed Church are all forms of the true church. So long as a church holds to the basic doctrines of the Christian faith, it cannot be called false. All these churches possess a measure of the truth. The most that can be said is that one is more pure than another. This doctrine of pluriformity has bred an attitude of unholy toleration. It is sadly ironic that the one thing that is not tolerated in Christianity today is intolerance.

To this we reply that there is one Lord Jesus Christ, one Spirit, one faith, one baptism. The church has one norm - the Holy Scriptures. Therefore it has one form. Throughout the ages, the church has possessed this one form, which is evident in the three marks.

The Church is United

The uniformity which the church enjoys with respect to the preaching, the sacraments and discipline, is the basis for the unity of the Universal Church. Even though the church is being gathered from all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues, so that it meets in many local congregations, and even though the one may know nothing of the other, they are bound together in unity of faith. This is the unity of which our confession speaks in Art 27 Belgic Confession. *"The holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. However, it is joined and*

united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith."

The Universal Church that embraces the one faith is joined and united by the power of that faith. Where there is uniformity in the preaching of the gospel, in the administration of the sacraments, and in the exercising of church discipline, there is unity. Two local congregations which are a world apart geographically, who know nothing of each other and do not experience the joy of fellowship, are united if they both possess the marks of the true church.

When they do cross each other's paths, they recognise each other and embrace each other, giving expression to the unity of faith which they enjoy. The recognition of this unity is not always immediate. It usually takes some time to examine one another, to see whether they both possess the marks of the true church.

Only when the three marks can be recognised in each other can these churches come to the conclusion that they are one. For the unity of these churches depends upon this uniformity in preaching, sacraments and discipline. We can only speak of unity of two churches when it has been determined that both possess the marks of the true church. It is wrong to speak about unity or lack of unity before we have come to a conclusion whether such churches possess the three marks of the church. To say that there is unity is to admit that they are a true church. To say that there is no unity is to acknowledge that they are a false church. We should not speak about unity until we have come to a conclusion as to whether or not there is uniformity with respect to the three marks.

Where two churches have found uniformity in the marks, and live in close proximity, it is the Lord's command that they give visible expression to the unity of faith that they have. Customs or tradition may not stand in the way of such a unity. Whether one sings with the accompaniment of an organ or not, and whether one sings the Psalms according

to the Genevan tunes or to some other suitable tune, are things which must not stand in the way of such unity. It is important for the church of Christ not to show division to the community in which they live.

Furthermore, it is the duty of all assemblies, which call themselves "church", but which do not maintain the uniformity of the true church, to bring themselves into harmony with the norm. Contrary to the opinion of some, the divisiveness in Christianity is not a pleasant situation, which allows people to choose a church as they would ice cream, choosing any flavour they want. The divisiveness in Christianity is a ploy of the evil one to make the gospel ineffective in the world.

In His High Priestly prayer, Christ prayed, *"I do not pray for them [the apostles] alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that the world may believe that You sent Me."* For Christ, this unity was an important factor in bringing the world to faith. He knew that the world would scoff when they saw how the Bible is interpreted in so many different ways. Is the Bible really the truth? Is Jesus really the Saviour of the world? However, there are so few who agree on what the truth really is." This leads some to deny the truth of the Scriptures.

The church of Christ must echo the prayer of Christ: 'Father, our desire is that all those who truly believe the gospel may be one, so that the world may believe that You are truly the Redeemer.' The church must endeavour to be faithful instruments of the Holy Spirit who works that unity. Through the opening of Scripture, they must endeavour to exhort other assemblies to obedience to that norm.

In the answer of this Lord's Day we confess that the church-gathering work is the work of the Son of God. He began this work prior to His incarnation (coming in the flesh) and now continues this work as

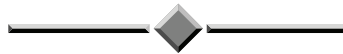
the ascended Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Head of the church, and to him has been given all power and authority in heaven and on earth with which to gather His church. He gathers His church through the working of the Holy Spirit and through the Word, the Scriptures. We can even speak more concretely. The Son of God calls men to proclaim the Scriptures, men who are endowed with the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit uses this humble proclamation as His tool for the building up of faith in the hearts of the believers.

It is also through the Spirit and the Word that the Son of God defends and preserves His church. Paul calls faith a “shield” by which we can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. (cf. Ephesians 6:16) The Word of God is a sharp sword that the Spirit uses to defend and preserve us. Even Christ, when He was tempted in the wilderness by Satan, used Scripture to ward off the attack of the evil one. Thus one cannot stress enough the need for a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. Without this knowledge, we are weak and an easy prey for the evil one, being more susceptible to falling.

The last part of the answer concerning the church deals with the membership. There we confess that we are and forever shall remain living members of this church. Forever is a long time and we

sound pretty sure of our membership. Does this mean that we are so sure of ourselves? Not at all! We know that we are weak and prone to fall. Yet when we confess this, we confess our assurance in God, that He will not let go of us, but will always hold onto those whom He has elected. He will finish perfectly what He has begun to undertake for us. This gives us great comfort and consolation. Nothing will separate us from the love of God. How rich is God's grace to us!

Notice that the Catechism speaks of “*living*” membership in the church. This implies that there are also dead members. They are the ones who do not truly believe, nor do they really love God. Although they attend church and perhaps perform other works, be it by way of custom or superstition, thinking that membership in the church or outward obedience will permit them to escape God's wrath and win His favour. Yet our Lord has clearly taught us that not all who say, “*Lord, Lord*” will be received into His eternal kingdom. On the Day of Judgment, the dead branches will be cut off and cast into condemnation. Thus it is of the greatest importance to be “*living*” members, spiritually alive and active in the congregation of our Lord.



Questions:

1. What do we mean when we confess the church to be “holy?”
2. What does the word “catholic” mean? In what three respects is the church catholic?
3. When was the word “Christian” inserted into the creed, and why? Do all churches have this word in their version of the Apostles' Creed?
4. From what is the word “church” derived? What does the word “church” mean?
5. What common feature do the Reformers display when speaking about the catholic or universal church?
6. What does John 10:16 say?
7. Are all the elect automatically members of Christ's church by way of their election? What makes them members?
8. How should we not view the church of Christ?
9. In what two ways or from what two perspectives may we speak about the universal church? In which way do the Reformers speak of it in the quotations given?

10. Does Scripture support the concept of an invisible church? Why do some people choose to speak about it?
11. Are all the elect (or all believers) members of Christ's church now already? Give three reasons why (not).
12. For what two reasons is the church not perfect yet?
13. What are the three marks of the church?
14. Will all true churches teach the same doctrine and proclaim the same message? Why (not)?
15. Will all true churches teach about and administer the sacraments in the same way? Why (not)?
16. Will all true churches exercise Christian discipline in the same manner? Why (not)?
17. Do your answers to the questions above teach uniformity or pluriformity in the church of Christ?
18. What attitude does the doctrine of pluriformity breed in the church?
19. What is the basis for the unity of the church?
20. What must be determined before we may speak about unity of faith with other churches?
21. If churches are uniform in their preaching, in the administration of the sacraments and in church discipline, and if they live in close proximity to each other, what should they do?
22. How does Christ gather the church?
23. How does Christ defend the church?
24. How can we be sure that we shall forever remain living members of the church?
25. Why does the Catechism stress the need to be living members of the church?



THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

55. Q. What do you understand by
the communion of saints?

A. First,
that believers, all and everyone,
as members of Christ
have communion with Him
and share in all His treasures and gifts.¹
Second,
that everyone is duty-bound
to use his gifts
readily and cheerfully
for the benefit and well-being
of the other members.²

1. **Romans 8:32** He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

1 Corinthians 6:17 But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. ⁶ And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. ⁷ But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.

1 Corinthians 12:12,13 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body; whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free; and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

1 John 1:3 ...that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

2. **Romans 12:4-8** For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. ⁶ Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; ⁷ or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; ⁸ he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

1 Corinthians 12:20-27 But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. ²³ And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unrepresentable parts have greater modesty, ²⁴ but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, ²⁵ that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. ²⁶ And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

1 Corinthians 13:1-7 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ² And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. ⁴ Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; ⁵ does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; ⁶ does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Philippians 2:4-8 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵ Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

We are still busy with the work of the third Person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit. One of the gifts that Christ gives to the church through the Holy Spirit, is the gift of the communion of saints.

The first thing that we must do is define some words. Who are the *saints*? According to the church of Rome, saints are very pious Christians who have something most extraordinary. They have lived a very holy life, or they have done some very noble deeds in their life. They are elevated above the rest of the believers and assist other believers in salvation. They are prayed to and depended upon for assistance by the believers.

However, God's word declares that all those who are included into the covenant are saints. In 1 Corinthians 7:14, we read that children born of believing parents, are holy. Thus all covenant children are saints. Paul addresses some of his letters "to the saints in..." (cf. Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians and Philippians.)

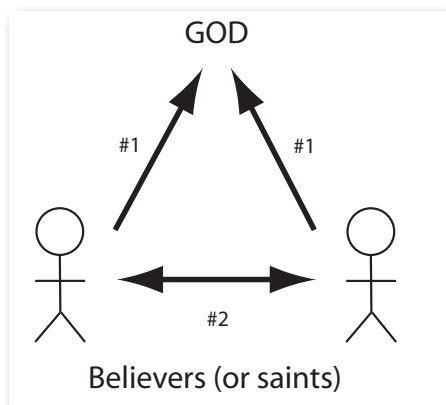
The second word that must be defined is the word '*communion*.' Sometimes this word is used for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The word '*communion*' really means '*fellowship, sharing, a close relationship*.' We will see later that there is communion in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, but this communion is not limited to that celebration.

When we speak about the communion of saints, we speak about that fellowship which the saints have. With whom do the saints have this fellowship? The answer is twofold:

1. **The saints have communion with Christ.** We might refer to this as *vertical communion*. (Vertical means up and down ⚡). Christ is the Head, and we are the body. The Spirit who dwells in Christ is also the Spirit who dwells within you. Through the Spirit, who works faith into your heart, you share in all the benefits of Christ. You have these benefits in common. For example, Christ's righteousness is not only His righteousness. By faith, His

righteousness becomes yours as well. His perfect holiness is your perfect holiness before the Father. You share in the gifts that Christ your Head earned through His obedience and death.

2. **The saints have communion with each other.** We might refer to this as **horizontal communion** (horizontal means side by side ⇔) The Spirit that dwells in Christ is the Spirit which dwells in you. Yet not only does the Holy Spirit dwell in you, it also dwells in me. That means we too, have something in common. Just as you share in Christ's righteousness, I do too. I share in Christ's holiness, even as you do. And that makes us have something in common. And our common heritage leads to the formation of a fellowship between the saints. The saints have communion with one another.



The saints must not remain by themselves, but they are to seek each other's company. We said that the saints have something in common.

They together, through faith, share in Christ's benefits. However, that does not mean that all the saints have the same gifts. While we have many gifts in common, it is also true that we each have some special gifts. One has a greater measure of wisdom, another a greater measure of patience, another a greater measure of knowledge, while another has a greater measure of compassion. We are not exactly the same. Not every one is an eye. Not everyone is an ear. Not everyone is a mouth. Yet we are all given different talents and gifts. We are called to use these to build one another up in the holy faith. We are to assist each other. Together we make up one body. We must not separate ourselves from the body, for what good would an eye be if it were taken out of the body?

We wrote earlier, concerning the church, that because of sin, not all the saints are members of Christ's church. There may be believers who are members of a false church. Now, if that person happens to be our neighbour, there will be a degree of communion between you and him. Yet your communion with him will not be a complete communion. For whatever it is which prevents him from joining the true church, also prevents you from enjoying that complete communion. And since the Lord's Supper is the greatest expression of our communion, both with the Lord and with one another, we will not celebrate this Supper with those with whom we do not enjoy complete communion.

Questions

1. Who are the saints:
 - a. according to the church of Rome?
 - b. according to the Scriptures?
2. What does the word "*communion*" mean? To what does it sometimes refer?
3. With whom do the saints have communion?
4. What does it mean to have communion with Christ?
5. Why should the saints not remain by themselves?
6. Can we have communion with other believers who do not belong to the church of Christ?

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

56. Q. What do you believe
Concerning *the forgiveness of sins*?

A. I believe that God,
because of Christ's satisfaction,
will no more remember
my sins,¹
nor my sinful nature,
against which I have to struggle
all my life,²
but will graciously grant me
the righteousness of Christ,
that I may never come into condemnation.³

1. **Psalm 103:3,4,10,12** ...Who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases,⁴ who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, ...¹⁰ He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities.¹² As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Micah 7:18,19 Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy.¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

2 Corinthians 5:18-21 Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,¹⁹ that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.²⁰ Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.²¹ For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 John 2:2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

2. **Romans 7:21-25** I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.²² For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.²³ But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.²⁴ O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?²⁵ I thank God; through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

3. **John 3:17,18** For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.¹⁸ He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John 5:24 Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

Romans 8:1,2 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.



The second gift which the Holy Spirit gives to the church is the gift of the forgiveness of sins.

How does God forgive our sins? When we forgive, it means that we let it go without asking for payment in return. If someone did something wrong to us, then if we forgive, that usually means that we

do not demand vengeance. We free that person of guilt.

Does God forgive in this way? Does He forgive in the sense of not demanding payment for sin? Earlier in the Catechism (cf. LD 4, Q/A 10) we learned that God cannot allow this sin to go unpunished. If we think that forgiveness means that

God will overlook our sins, then we are wrong. God demands payment.

When we confess that God forgives us our sins, then we mean that God will not demand payment from us. God demands payment, but He satisfies His justice in Jesus Christ, who makes payment for us. Our guilt cannot be erased except through the blood of our Saviour.

God no longer requires our blood, but accepts the payment which Christ made for us. This is what is meant by the phrase, "*He will no more remember our sins.*" He will no more bring them to mind with a view to demanding payment. He puts our sins behind Him. Although every sin which we commit is recorded in God's book, yet under our name there is a clean slate, for the blood of Christ erases sin. God will not bring our sins to remembrance.

In Micah 7:19, we read a most comforting passage. God "*will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.*" Today we have the technology to recover some things that have sunk to the bottom of the sea. But that was utterly impossible in the days when Micah wrote these words. If something was cast into the sea, it was gone for ever. So are our sins gone forever, if we confess in faith the grace of God's forgiveness in Christ.

There is more to God's grace than just the forgiveness of sins. There is also the

forgiveness of the weakness that still remains in me during this life. God no longer sees my shortcomings. He looks at me through the perfect obedience of Christ. Under my name is written, "*Perfect obedience to God's law.*" In God's record books, I have completed all of God's commandments perfectly. In God's eyes, I am righteous.

The Lord does not only forgive me my sins and weaknesses; He also forgives my sinful nature. There is a difference. He does not only forgive me *for what I've done*, but he forgives me *for what I am*. A good, kindhearted person can make a mistake, and that can be forgiven. However, our nature is corrupt. We are by nature hard-hearted. Yet God also forgives our sinful nature.

This forgiveness is not given indiscriminately to everyone. It is given only to believers, who through the Spirit are convicted of their sins, who are truly sorry for having offended God by them, and who repent of their sin and fight against it with all their might, and finally, who in faith cling to God's grace in the cross of Christ. This is worthy of note. Only he can find comfort in the forgiveness of sins who has confessed that he has sinned against God. Apart from this confession of guilt, and repentance, and faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice, there is no forgiveness.



Questions:

1. When we forgive sins, should we demand payment for satisfaction?
2. When God forgives sin, does He demand payment for satisfaction? Why (not)?
3. What does Micah 7:19 say? What does this imply?
4. What else does God forgive besides our sins? How does God regard me?
5. What further thing does God forgive besides my weaknesses and shortcomings?
6. Do we receive forgiveness simply by asking for it with our mouth? If not, what other requirements are there?