

Viewing and interacting with other true churches and their members

By forming our own Protestant Reformed Christian schools, our denomination has been able to teach our covenant children all things in the light of holy scripture. We have been able to form a close community surrounding our schools, strengthening the communion of the saints. Our children are able to develop in an atmosphere where honoring God's will is in the forefront, and secular worldviews are critically examined. We are able to provide our youth with a knowledge of the fundamental doctrines of our church. And most importantly, we have been able to instill in them a deep organic love for our holy God.

However, within our schools we continue to have several students that are members of congregations outside of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Furthermore, many young people of our churches have friends, relatives, or a significant other from another denominations as well. It is vitally important, therefore, that we have a proper view of other true churches of Jesus Christ, who often have differences in doctrine. Additionally we must be aware of how we interact with individual members of such churches; that is, we treat them with love and respect. This is something that Christian adults obviously must be cognizant of, but it is also of utmost importance that our children and young adults have a right understanding of these things; teachers, as leaders in our Christian community, must be ready to give instruction and guidance regarding these ideas.

How do we know the difference between an apostate church, and a true church that may be subject to error? The Belgic Confession, Article 29, examines this difference: "The marks by which the true Church is known are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin: in short, if all things are managed according to the

pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.” This particular definition of a true church does not exclude any denomination by name, nor does it hold one specific church as the only true church. In fact, this encompasses many church institutes.

The same article addresses what makes a false church: “As for the false Church, she ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ. Neither does she administer the sacraments as appointed by Christ in his Word, but adds to and takes from them, as she thinks proper; she relieth more upon men than upon Christ; and persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God, and rebuke her for her errors, covetousness, and idolatry.” The Roman Catholic Church is an example, along with the mega-churches so popular today, and countless others.

How do we view other true churches of Jesus Christ, which may err in doctrine, or otherwise hold to doctrines that the Protestant Reformed Churches do not? They are not apostate churches, but still may have some discrepancies or differences compared to our own denomination. Prof. David Engelsma, in his book *Bound to Join*, examines this. He states as an example that the churches holding to the well-meant offer or common grace are *not* necessarily false churches. “The doctrine of the well-meant offer, adopted and taught by a Reformed or Presbyterian church...does not, by virtue of this fact, make that church a false church” (Engelsma, 16). Apostasy, though, is a slow process, and a church holding to such heretical doctrines may very well fall into apostasy over the course of a few generations. Of course it is important for these churches to repent and turn to the truth. But, a church holding to false doctrine may still have the marks of a true church. (For example, they may not have a formal stance on the matter; they may have some ministers still preaching the truth alongside the heresy)

(Engelsma, 32). That is not to say a believer ought to stay in that church; God's elect must search out the purest preaching of the gospel in order to stay spiritually nourished and strong in faith.

There are several historical and biblical examples of this. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians addresses the church's error of rejecting the bodily resurrection of the saints, and the church of the Galatians was beginning to err towards justification by works with faith. Obviously one could not say that these early Christian churches of the New Testament were apostate. Rather, they were in need of guidance; and it was this guidance that the apostle Paul provided, with his instruction grounded firmly in scripture. Farther along in church history, during the Protestant Reformation, the Reformed faith did not agree with some of the Lutheran doctrines, such as consubstantiation. Yet Reformed churches did not discard the Lutheran church as one of the false churches of Rome (Engelsma, 31). There are always going to be some churches that are in need of repentance and guidance, but this does not necessarily categorize them as false churches. They may be in need of direction, and may have members crying out for help. Despite this, if with the resistance of the remnant the church still falls short, chances are the church will eventually descend the slippery slope of apostasy. Then God's people must be urged to find a church wherein they may confess that they wholeheartedly believe the preaching "taught here in this Christian church to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation."

Once we understand how we ought to view the many other true churches of Jesus Christ, the next question is how we ought to view and interact with the individual members of these churches. As children, churches outside of our own denomination often seem very distant and detached; but the more our young people grow and develop in the world, the more contact they make with members of other churches. As maturing Christians, it is important for our covenant youth to have a proper mindset when it comes to this.

One thing we must remember is that there is a difference between someone who is an unbeliever and someone who is a Christian of a different denomination of true church. Unfortunately, sometimes the lines may seem a bit blurred. For example, there may be a self-identified “Christian” who does not believe in heaven or hell, claims Jesus was merely a man, does not believe in the infallibility of scripture, and holds to the idea that sin is subjective. Such a person can hardly be considered a Christian (not to say it’s impossible for the individual to repent). But we may come across a stout Christian who holds dearly to his salvation and the sovereignty of God, but has a lax view on divorce. They know the infallibility of the word of God, but simply have been taught from childhood to explain away passages like Mark 10 and Matthew 19. Do we view such a person as an unbeliever, a heretic, a deceiver? Do we group the church to which she is a member in the same category as Rob Bell’s mega-church, or the Church of Rome? There is such a spectrum on which “Christianity” is defined; there are millions and millions of people who call themselves Christians, with vastly differing beliefs. What we must look for is someone who has a genuine love for God, whose only hope is in Jesus Christ who mercifully saves from all sin, who believes in the absolute authority of scripture, and who strives to live a God-glorifying life separate from the world.

Article 29 of the Belgic Confession puts this concept in our Confessions. “With respect to those who are members of the Church, they may be known by the marks of Christians: namely, by faith; and when they have received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof. But this is not to be understood, as if there did not remain in them great infirmities; but they fight against them through the Spirit, all the days of

their life, continually taking their refuge in the blood, death, passion and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they have remission of sins, through faith in him.”

This confession is summarized in Romans 10:9–13. “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved....For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Salvation is not dependent on the denomination one attends. Attending a true church is necessary and invaluable, but being an elect child of God is not dependent on one’s church membership papers.

We recite in the Apostle’s Creed, “I believe an holy catholic church; the communion of saints.” That is, we believe that there are Christians found all throughout the world, members of innumerable denominations, holding to hundreds of differing doctrines and confessions. God never intended for his people to all belong to one singular earthly instituted church. We cannot ostracize or patronize fellow believers because they have a different church background than we do. We believe in communion of the saints. But we cannot achieve this if we don’t honor, love, and respect our brothers and sisters in Christ. John 10:16 makes it very clear that there have always been many elect that will be united together: “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.”

So how do we speak with such fellow believers of other churches? Obviously, we must treat them with love. “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath

forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:29–32). When we speak, we must speak out of kindness, and our words must be words of edification. As members of the body of Christ, our goal is always to glorify God (Romans 1-7): “Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 5–6).

It is good for us to commune with other saints. It is good for us to make friends with believers from other churches. The Protestant Reformed Churches have correspondents in Australia, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Singapore, Myanmar, etc. And we can witness and fellowship with other Christians right in Western Michigan just as well. It is true that perhaps some people we meet may be in need of guidance and instruction, or perhaps even repentance from false doctrines. Likewise, others may be able to teach us a great deal as well. A true child of God should be able to read God’s word and discuss it with a fellow believer in a God-glorifying conversation. And by searching the scriptures together, we may grow more in more in our faith, and become more and more aware of the beautifully complex and diverse church body to which we belong.

Our young people are going to come into contact with believers of other churches, whether they be friends, family, significant others, or fellow classmates. As teachers, it is our responsibility to rear covenant youth, guiding them and instructing them as they mature into godly young men and women. Instilling in them a right understanding of the catholicity and unity of the true church and body of Christ is extremely important, and there is no better place to engender this truth than in our Christian schools. Our Christian schools are an invaluable part of our lives as covenant children of God. Let us use this means to its fullest capacity to impart a proper godly worldview in our covenant children.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Engelsma, David J. *Bound to Join*. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2010. Print.

All Bible verses are quoted from the King James Version