

No Salvation Outside Of The Church
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Many Reformed believers have a hard time understanding what the Belgic Confession has to say about Christ's church. In Article 27 of the Confession, we acknowledge one catholic or universal church which is from the beginning of time to the end of time. Then in Article 28 we state it is our duty to join and unite with this church, maintaining its unity and submitting to its discipline. What throws many off is that Article 28 seems to start off talking about the one, universal church but then in mid sentence, speaks about that church as if it were only a local congregation. Some think that Article 28 confuses the universal church with the local congregation. To add to the confusion, the Confession warns that there is no salvation outside of the church – the church which we are duty bound to join and never leave. To some that sounds like a threat we might expect from the Pope, but not from Protestants whose existence as Protestants is the result of separating from the Roman Catholic Church.

The exact wording of the pertinent parts of the two articles is as follows (with emphasis added):

*Article 27: We believe and profess one catholic or **universal Church, which is a holy congregation** of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit. This Church has been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof.*

*Article 28: We believe, since **this holy congregation** is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them.*

If it seems to you that the Confession of Faith equates the one universal church with the local congregation, you are reading the Confession correctly. That is exactly what is meant.

Why does the Confession equate the two? Because the universal church has no existence here on earth apart from local groups of believers who join and unite together as a body under Christ their Head. In Matthew 16:18 Christ promised to build His church. The church that He is building is His universal church. Christ's universal church has ministers, elders and deacons. It has the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of discipline. It also has members who make every effort to keep (maintain) the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). The church has members who submit to the discipline of those who are over them in the Lord (Acts 20:28) and who work together in a close bond of fellowship building each other up in the faith as members of one body (1 Corinthians 12:12-26).

Some speak of the universal church as being an invisible church. It is true that right now you and I cannot see the whole church from the beginning of time to the end of time or see the church in heaven. But the church on earth has always been visible because the church is people and God has made no invisible people. Wherever the church has been (this side of heaven) and whenever the church has been, it has consisted of people meeting together in holy convocation, calling on the name of the Lord (Genesis 4:26). They were, and are, always visible as a group to themselves, their friends and their enemies.

The church is especially distinguished and recognized by its preaching of the Word, its God given ceremonies and its exercise of discipline. It can also be said that the church is recognized by its exercise of the keys of the kingdom given to it by Christ and by which He is building it. All these marks are visible activities by which we can see Christ's church on earth. There is no Church of Christ on earth other than these holy congregations meeting together in submission to Christ.

That is why the Confession equates the universal church with the local congregation. The universal church on earth is visibly manifested in the local congregation. The universal church has no existence apart from local congregations. That is where Christ's universal church is to be found. That is why the Confession says there can be no salvation outside of that church of which it is our duty to join.

The fact that we are duty bound to join a local congregation implies that a person may be a true believer and not yet be a member of a local congregation of Christ's church. God is certainly patient with believers who come to faith while not members of any church. He is also patient, I'm sure, with believers in transitional circumstances, like emigration or reformation. But if a believer stubbornly refuses to join a body of believers bearing the marks of Christ's church despite repeated instruction and admonitions, then that person is in rebellion against Christ who commands us to keep the unity, work together and submit to church leaders. If such a person is in open and persistent rebellion against Christ, he is most likely deceiving himself about being a true believer in Christ. Stubborn refusal to do what Christ commands when the command is well understood, with ample opportunity to obey, is a mark of one who is in grave danger of being lost. We do such people no good service if we allow them to think that they may remain aloof of Christ's church and yet be saved. Thus the strong warning of our confession that there is no salvation outside of the church.

The New Testament is full of commands to love the brotherhood, strive to be of one mind, be reconciled, work for mutual edification as members of one body, be submissive to authority and the like. Such commandments are numerous because they are needed. Our old nature pulls us in the opposite direction. That is why the Confession warns against being "content" to be by one's self. It is a real temptation, present in every age. At the time the Confession of Faith was written there were the "watchful waiting" and the "secret believers" – people that were afraid of Roman Catholic persecution if they joined the church. Thus the last words of Article 28 about the need to join the church regardless of the edicts of princes . . . death . . . or corporal punishment. There is also the temptation to remain aloof from the church because of the spirit of rugged individualism and our hostility to being under authority, warned against in Romans 13:1-5. Like Adam in his fall, we want to "be like God" and answer to no higher authority than self.

When the Confession of Faith says there is no salvation outside of the church, it is not teaching salvation by church membership or justification by works of the law. It is teaching that saving faith is always fruitful. Saving faith makes us want to obey Christ and leads us to begin to obey His commands. A very important command is the duty to live and work together with fellow Christians as members of one body under those who represent Christ's authority. Paul warns that "whoever resists the authorities, resists what God has appointed and will incur judgment" Romans 13:2. If that is true with regard to civil authorities, it is equally true of church authorities whom we are commanded to respect and obey. To refuse to join and unite with Christ's church is to resist Christ. Those who resist Christ have no right to believe that their faith is genuine. The idea of no salvation outside of the church is not about how we become Christians. It is about how we know if we are Christians.

The mistake that some make is to think of the church on earth solely in terms of election. Since we can be sure of no one's election but our own, some reason that the church is invisible to all but God. However, when Christ spoke of building His church, He did not describe election as the requirement for membership. He said the foundation upon which the church was to be built was the rock of a good

confession; one like Peter's. And He gave the keys of the kingdom to the church to enforce the standard of a good confession for church membership. He gave to the church the task of making and instructing disciples. Disciples are distinguished by their confession and their obedience. When we admit new members or excommunicate members we make no inquiry into the secret council of God concerning election. Excommunication, especially, is a loving rebuke and strong warning while there is yet time to repent. It is not a final judgment regarding someone's election. All the church can do is look for a good confession and a life consistent with it (or note the absence of such). Although the church, as a whole, can be called the assembly of the elect and believers can be assured of their election through their church membership (as well as their joyful obedience to other commands), yet we know there may be hypocrites in the church and some of God's elect have not yet been gathered into the church. Therefore we should not think of the church exclusively in terms of election or think that the church is visible only to God.

There are aspects of the church that cannot be seen, but if the church were invisible to us, we could hardly be faulted for failing to fulfill our membership responsibilities. Where would we go to fulfill them? Christ expects us to be able to see His church and be fully engaged in it according to our gifts.

We should not think that we are members of Christ's universal church while at the same time we spurn or reject the church which Christ is building on this earth. There is no salvation outside of Christ's universal church and we can have no confidence that we are members of that universal church unless we join and unite with the visible manifestation of that universal church on earth – the local congregation. RAP