

Ps 122:1,2
Hy 1A
Hy 40:1,2,3,4,5
Ps 16:1,2
Hy 46:1,2
John 17:1-12
Ephesians 4:1-6
Lord's Day 21.54

Yarrow, May 23, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We come today to the single Question & Answer of our Catechism that deals exclusively with the topic of the Church. It turns out that there is considerable confusion in both community and congregation about what this church actually is. Chilliwack, I understand, has some sixty churches, and that fact in itself betrays confusion in town about what God wants us to think about His church. There is a ministerial association in town that cobbles together an annual joint service – and the purpose of the service is to show town that the church in Chilliwack is united, even though it meets at some sixty addresses, teaches different things, and worships in different ways. It's confusing, and many of us share that confusion. Just what is the church? Does it really matter which church I attend? Is it OK to go to this church simply because my parents and friends go here? How does one determine which church to attend??

I cannot answer these questions (and more) in one sermon. So I intend to spend multiple Lord's Days on the subject of the church. We'll need to begin with a broad overview of what the church is – that's today's material– so that we can on a later Sunday work out some of the consequences that follow.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE CHURCH IS A WONDERFUL WORK OF TRIUNE GOD IN TODAY'S FALLEN WORLD.

1. Today's understanding of what the church is
2. The Bible's revelation of what the church is
3. Our appreciation of what the church is

1. Today's Understanding of what the Church is.

As I mentioned, the community of Chilliwack has dozens of churches affiliated with nearly as many federations of churches. Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed, community churches, Pentecostal, Mennonite: the list goes on. It turns out that this phenomenon of so many different federations of churches in a given town is relatively new in history, going back no more than three or so centuries. The rise of all these churches has required an explanation to justify this abundance.

The explanation common in our (western) culture goes under the name of denominationalism. You won't find the term 'denominations' anywhere in the Bible; the term comes instead from the field of banking, and describes the various dollar notes available in our currency. One can today get a \$5 note, a \$10 note, a 20, a 50, etc, and each of these different notes are considered different 'denominations'. Though we may find the one denomination (say the \$100 note) more desirable than

another (say the \$10 note), all –and this is the key point– *all are equally legitimate* before the law of the land and all have a role to play in doing your shopping. Applied to the churches of town: all churches, says this explanation, are equally legitimate denominations, all have a role to play in the spiritual market place, though the one denomination may be more agreeable to your taste than the next. Since all are legitimate denominations, where you go to church is ultimately up to your individual taste. The music, the people, the preacher, accessibility and so many other factors all help you decide where you feel comfortable. This also means that you ought not to pass judgment on other churches of town; that you think your church is the better one for you is fine, as long as you leave other people space to make their own choice for their own reasons.

To be complete, I should say that behind this notion of denominationalism lies a bit of philosophy arising from the Greeks of 300 BC. The philosopher Plato observed that the world in which we live has countless varieties of trees, birds, horses, dogs, etc. Trees, birds, horses, dogs come in different sizes and shapes, come in *plural forms*. Which tree, which bird, which horse is the real tree, the real bird, the real horse by heaven's definition?? Plato argued that God has a particular tree in his mind (or bird or horse or dog), and that's of course a perfect, flawless tree (or bird or horse). And since it's in the mind of God it's the real one, the one that ultimately counts. He continued: every tree or bird on earth is a *representation* of the perfect tree or bird in the mind of God. But some trees are better looking (or more productive) trees than others, and so the one tree is a *more accurate representation* of the tree-in-God's-mind than the next tree. The oak and the fir and the dogwood are all *true* trees, but the fir (let us say) is a *more pure representation* of the tree-in-God's-mind than the dogwood. Not that the tree God sees in the eye of his mind is a fir; the tree God sees is invisible to us.

Theologians have made use of this element of Plato's philosophy to explain how it's OK that town has many denominations. As every tree in the forest is a better or lesser representation of the true (and invisible) tree in God's mind, so each church, each denomination, in the forest of life is equally real and legitimate, but the one is a more accurate representation of the invisible church, the church-as-God-sees it, than the next; this is the *pluriformity* of the church. Since we'll never know whether the real tree in God's mind looks like a fir or a dogwood (or some other tree), so we'll never know whether the real church in God's mind looks like the Canadian Reformed Church or like a Community church. And that in turn means that we can all have our personal taste as to which church *we think* is closest to the true one in-God's-mind – as long as we stay with the Scripture (and even that is open to personal interpretation). The long and short is that we need in humility to accept all churches of town as real or true, *and* we need to accept in humility that other people may prefer their church over our church. So the real church as God sees it comes to expression in the many churches of town, just as the real tree as God sees it comes to expression in the abundant variety of the bush. It is this mutual acceptance of one another as different but true churches of God's forest that drives the effort to have an annual combined service, be it here in Yarrow, be it the one in the Prospera Centre.

I don't know about you, but I'll readily admit that this effort to explain and justify the numerous churches of town makes sense to my mind and for that very reason I find it attractive. The question is, however: is today's understanding of what 'church' is in agreement with the Lord's revelation? What has *He* said about church?

2. The Bible's Revelation about what Church is.

I need to stress first of all that the church is the work of God in a way no other organization of town is. Chilliwack has any number of societies and clubs that meet together from time to time, be it a hiking club or a heritage club or a quilting club. Since God is almighty –so much so that nothing happens

by chance— the existence and makeup of the Chilliwack Hiking Club is the work of God. But the church is His work in a much richer and fuller way. I want to draw that out with reference to the Trinity.

With the fall into sin back at the beginning of earth's history, the entire human race deserted God and joined the devil. God in mercy was not pleased to leave the whole human race on the devil's side, and so set about redeeming particular people. The first step in this process of redemption, says the Scripture, is that God the Father *chose* particular persons for salvation. Paul tells the Christians of Ephesus that "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight" (Ephesians 1:3,4). That is: of the total number of humanity on Satan's side, God the Father picked some (and only some) to be saved from Satan's bondage. Because of this electing work of the Father, Jesus could tell His disciples that the Father has given particular persons to the Son (John 6:37), and add the promise that the Son would not lose any whom the Father had given to Him (John 6:39).

When the Son, then, was about to go to the cross, He first prayed to the Father about the very people whom the Father had given to Him. This is the prayer of John 17, where Jesus says to His Father, "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world" (John 17:6). "Those whom you gave me" are the ones the Father chose for redemption from Satan's slavery. Jesus continues, "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours" (vs 9). Jesus realizes: because of the work He will do on the cross (He will pay for sin, defeat Satan, and so redeem the elect), Satan will be furious with the elect and seek to snatch them from the Saviour's hand. So Jesus prays for these elect, prays that God will preserve and bring them to glory (see vs 24). Meanwhile, on the cross Jesus shed His blood to deliver this specific number of sinners from Satan's bondage. These are the one restored to God.

Yet to benefit from the redeeming work of the Saviour, these persons need faith in Jesus Christ. That is why Christ, after His ascension into heaven, sent His disciples to preach the Word to all people. Jesus did not tell the disciples who were elect (though He Himself knows), but simply gave them the mandate to preach – and He would ensure that those whom the Father had given to Him would hear and come to faith. This, in fact, is the work of the Holy Spirit; through the Word the Spirit makes people believe in Christ Jesus, and at the same time changes their hearts so that they learn to live as God's people ought to live. This is the mighty work of the Spirit we spoke about last week.

Yet even saying it this way does not describe in full the work of triune God in relation to the church. Yes, the Father has chosen particular persons to salvation, and yes, the Son has laid down His life for those elect people, and yes, the Holy Spirit works faith in them through the Word these elect come to hear. But there's more. For the fact that God the Father has elect people in a given town, and the fact that God the Son paid for their sin on the cross, and the fact that the Holy Spirit has worked faith in these sinners, does not mean that therefore there is in that town a church. That the jailer in Philippi came to faith and Lydia also (Acts 16), and let's assume a handful of others did also, did not mean that *therefore* Christ had a church in that town. That's because the Bible's definition of what a church is requires *more* than that elect people have come to faith in Jesus Christ.

How so? What 'more' does the Bible say? We're so very used to the word 'church', and in our minds connect it automatically to a building, the place where people 'go to church'. But it turns out that the English term 'church' translates a Greek word that has nothing to do with a building or even a locality; it instead has everything to do with *gathering*. In the Old Testament the people of Israel repeatedly and regularly left their tents and homes to *meet together* (be it at Mt Sinai, be it at the tabernacle, etc) to hear God's Word. That meeting is repeatedly described in our translations as a 'gathering' or an 'assembly' (cf Deuteronomy 4:10; 9:10; 10:4). When the Hebrew Old Testament was

translated into Greek, that word was rendered by the well-known Greek word 'ecclesia' – from which we get our English word 'ecclesiastical'. But the Greek word 'ecclesia' simply means 'gathering', 'assembly'. You find that word in Acts 19 in the passage about the riot in Ephesus. I read in Acts 19:32 concerning the crowd that "the assembly was in confusion", and when the city clerk arrived and said this and that to the crowd "he dismissed the assembly" (vs 41). 'Assembly': that's the very word the Holy Spirit uses repeatedly for 'church'. The point is that a church is not simply those whom the Father has elected and the Son has redeemed and the Spirit has renewed so that 'the church' is the body of elect as only God in heaven can see it. No, the church *by definition* is a *gathering* of people, and specifically a gathering of the Lord's people who have come together to hear His word and to worship Him. By extension, those who *habitually gather* may be called a church even when they are not gathered at that moment. But to speak of believers-who-do-not-go-to-church as if they are part of the Lord's church is simple unbiblical. That sort of language is instead the consequence of Plato's philosophy....

The picture we have, then, is this: the Lord Jesus Christ after His ascension into heaven remains hard at work. Yes, He intercedes for God's own, and Yes, He governs the world as Lord of lords and King of kings. But He governs the world *according to a specific agenda*. Recall: the Father has chosen particular people to life and given those specific persons to the Son. The task of the ascended Christ is now to gather these elect together to be His church, the assembly of His people, on this earth. He achieves this goal by sending His preachers to preach the Word here, there, everywhere, wherever there are elect people that the Father has given to the Son. Meanwhile, He sends His Holy Spirit to accompany His preachers so that their preaching meet with faith in the hearts of the elect. In it all He ensures that the political, economic, social, etc, circumstances are such that the Word actually can go out and the chosen hearer actually can hear and respond with faith. In other words, He governs the world according to the mandate of the Father to gather His church from the elect the Father has given Him. That's the common denominator behind the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the economic woes of Europe, the riots in Bangkok, the mauling of the man this past week in Ontario's cottage country, and so on; all these developments and so many more are so many circumstances Christ has put in place to promote the gathering of His people in this world. I'd love to understand all the details, and how it all comes together, but I can't, and that's OK; the ascended Christ is too mighty and great for that. But this is the glorious church-gathering work of our Saviour in the course of history. In the words of our Lord's Day: "I believe that the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, by his Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church chosen to everlasting life." That's the confession of the church, brothers and sisters, your confession and mine: history as it unfolds in today's news has a purpose, and that purpose revolves around the church. That purpose includes bringing the elect to faith, yet includes *more* than that; it includes *gathering* these believers together. It is that *habitual gathering* that makes a body of believers a church.

And why is that gathering important? This gathering, this church in turn is obvious and visible in the community, is known as the people who gather to hear God's Word so that they might be equipped for further service to God in God's big world. This is Christ's public work in a hostile world.

What, then, is a church? Article 27 of the *Belgic Confession* puts into brief and plain words what the Lord has revealed on the point. For Article 27 gives this description: 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." That confession uses

two key words that boil down to the same thing; the church is a “congregation and assembly”. You can see a gathering, you can find a gathering, you can join a gathering. But the assembly described here is not a gathering of the local hiking club and it’s not an assembly of stamp collectors either, but it is an assembly “of the true Christian believers” – and these people of course “expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.” This church, we need to note, is distinctly and fully the work of Jesus Christ. The existence of this church is His response to the list of the elect the Father gave to Him. In accordance with the will of God Jesus Christ not only gave His life for the redemption of these chosen ones, but in the course of time leads history in such a way that these elect both come to faith and are assembled together as His obvious work in a hostile world.

And no, beloved, this is not irrelevant theory. This touches *you*. For *you* are an object of His work, *you* have been chosen by God for redemption from Satan’s bondage, chosen for life everlasting, and so Christ died for *you* and in the course of time Christ has joined *you* to His church. Here is something exciting, invigorating and so very contemporary; in *this* world your Saviour is hard at work gathering His church, and you are part of it – how delightfully stimulating the thought!!

That leaves us with our last point:

3. Our appreciation of what the church is

If the church, then, is the gathering of those whom the Father has elected and the Son has redeemed and the Holy Spirit has renewed, does any consequence follow?

There is so very much more I need to work out another time, the Lord willing, but already the answer is distinctly Yes. For the Lord’s church gathering work happens *in the midst of this world*. This world has no appreciation for God and His redeeming grace in Christ Jesus, and so has no time for the Saviour’s church-gathering work. The devil, too, can’t stomach the church, and so would love to snuff her out. He can try to do that through persecution so that believers no longer dare, or perhaps even cannot, assemble publicly any longer. That way the church is out of the public eye, no longer an offence – or a testimony – to the unbelieving public. The devil can also try to make the church inoffensive by changing the message that is preached so that the message is not offensive to the public. Again, he can try to change the behaviour of the people who gather together so that town sees them as no different from anybody else. He can also make ‘church’ into a service to the community, where each can come for the spiritual experience of his preference. All these things and more are happening today, in one way or another. So town has many clubs and societies, some of which revolve around hobbies, some revolve around sport, and some around religion – something for everybody. And those societies that gravitate to religion have different messages and experiences too, according to the demands of public taste. And the danger is that Canadian Reformed Church just becomes one of those religious societies in town, doing our own thing as the quilting club does its thing, providing a product suited the tastes of a specific clientele.

But that simply does not do justice to the Bible’s instruction about what ‘church’ is. ‘Church’ is not people’s work like the quilting club is people’s work. ‘Church’ is not a human organization that gives you a spiritual experience suited to your taste. All things human will pass away, and so will every organization in town that seeks to give a product to massage people’s needs – the spiritual included. ‘Church’ is a *divine work* in a way nothing else on earth is a divine work. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have worked and are working, and the result is that, despite Satan’s rage and the world’s hatred of the truth of God, there is a church in town of true Christian believers. It’s visible, it *has* to be

visible, and its very existence is a loud testimony to the unbelieving that God is real, His Son triumphant, His Spirit powerful!

Yet the very fact that the Christians of town go to *so many churches* gives to town the signal that Christ is divided, His work confusing, the truth of the gospel obscure – that ‘church’ is all about satisfying the customer’s demands. After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, the church in Jerusalem was united, one in heart and soul. The result was that “everyone was filled with awe” (Acts 2:43) and the believers “were highly regarded by the people” (5:13). That’s not so today, for in Chilliwack people go to many churches who in turn believe different things. That undermines the effectiveness of the gospel in town. Yet what was Jesus’ prayer in John 17? Concerning those whom the Father had given to the Son Jesus said, “Holy Father, protect them by the power of Your name –the name you gave me– so that they may be one as we are one” (vs 11). Why would Jesus want them to be one? What’s wrong with division? What’s wrong with so many different brands of the truth in town? Listen to Paul’s instruction to the Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit –just as you were called to one hope when you were called– one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4ff). He’s adamant: there are not multiple truths or versions of the truth; there is one Christ who pays for sin in one way only so that there is only one faith and one baptism and one way of salvation. But then all who call themselves by the name of Christ in town are to proclaim that one single gospel from their pulpits. Yet that does not happen, and as a result the people of town –whether believing or unbelieving– do not see the work of Jesus Christ as the glorious work it is. Remember Jesus’ prayer for those who would believe in the course of history; said He to the Father in John 17:23: “May they be brought to complete unity to *let the world know* that you sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.” The abundance of churches, the fragmentation of Christianity, does not do the cause of the gospel and the glory of Jesus Christ any good! The ‘church’ becomes a laughing stock in the community.... For Christ’s name’s sake and the salvation of the unbelieving, this is a reality to which we cannot and may not acquiesce. Town needs the truth of the gospel, clearly and plainly, and then unity around that truth. That is the consequence that flows from the fact that the church is God’s work.

And given what we see in town, such unity is so far away, so impossible....

Yet we may not lose heart. The church is and remains the Lord’s work. The Father has given a fixed number of people to the Son for redemption, and –as Jesus said in His prayer of John 17– “none has been lost except the one doomed to destruction” (Judas Iscariot) – and none will be lost either. For the Christ who ascended is almighty, and His grip on the rudder of history is total. John describes in Revelation 14 the vision the ascended Christ showed him: “there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mt Zion, and with Him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” (vs 1). 144,000: the number is symbolic of all God’s elect from Old and New Testament dispensation. Here they are, assembled together as one body, the church of Jesus Christ complete.

Today we see much brokenness and confusion. But the brokenness and the confusion will not last. Christ’s work will.