

Ps 32:1,2,3  
Hy 1A  
Ps 133:1,2  
Ps 65:2,3  
Ps 16:1; Hy 38:2  
Romans 5:1-11  
Philippians 2:1-11  
Lord's Day 21.55,56

Yarrow, July 4, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

With some 60 churches in our not-so-large community, it's not such a surprise that there's a measure of confusion about what we're to believe concerning the church. In an effort to learn from God's word what He tells us about the church, we've spent a number of Sundays listening to God's instruction as the church has summarized it in Lord's Day 21.54 and in Articles 27-32 of the *Belgic Confession*.

What's come out loud and clear over the weeks, I trust, is that the church is not the work of man but of the ascended Christ. The Father has given particular persons to the Son who in turn laid down His life for these elect sinners – and then poured out His Holy Spirit to work faith in their hearts. From His throne in heaven the victorious Christ governs the history of the world in such a way that the elect hear the gospel and come to faith, more, He sovereignly gathers His own into His church. The means by which He gathers His own is specifically His Word; the sheep of the Lord are to listen for the Voice of the Shepherd, and then follow where that Voice directs. That is why any church worthy of the name 'church' must in its liturgy give primary place to what God says (and that's specifically the preaching) and give secondary place to the response of God's people to that preaching. Similarly, to be worthy of the name 'church' any assembly of God's people must have office bearers who speak out of the Word of God, repeating to the Lord's people what the Good Shepherd says. Even the way the congregation members encourage and admonish each other must be from out of the Word of the Lord. That's where we left off last time.

That brings us to the next critical question. It's this: what's the content of the voice of the Good Shepherd? What's the message that must be heard from the pulpit time and again? At the end of the day, it's the material confessed in Lord's Day 21.56 about the forgiveness of sins. The good news of forgiveness brings about a lifestyle on the part of the forgiven, and that's what's caught in Question & Answer 55 about the communion of saints.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST IS THE ASSEMBLY OF THE FORGIVEN.**

1. The Gospel of this Forgiveness,
2. The Consequence of this Forgiveness.

## 1. *The Gospel of this Forgiveness*

Everything the Good Shepherd has revealed in Scripture, whether it be about creation or providence or the Trinity or the two natures of Christ or His ascension or His return, is valuable and necessary – if only because God Himself has revealed it. On top of that, the Word of God is so much of one piece that one cannot omit a part of God's revelation without doing damage to your understanding of another part. None of that, however, takes anything away from the fact that one doctrine lies closer to the heart of the good news than another doctrine. It turns out that what God has revealed about the forgiveness of sins lies right at the heart of what the Bible is about. Here is the gospel in all its glory!

What's there about the forgiveness of sins that makes this doctrine so vital? Why, congregation, it all has to do with God's identity as God! The song of the angels in Isaiah 6:3 catches it well: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty!" So holy is He that He cannot tolerate sin. In His wisdom He created people with the mandate to image Him, and so made people *responsible* – and that's what makes people different from rabbits. As a responsible creature, mankind was able to rebel against God, and so God told him right away that if he rebelled he would surely die (Genesis 2:17). In Adam and Eve the human race did sin, and so earned God's righteous sentence of death. Immediately upon the fall into sin we died spiritually and in the course of years we all also die physically.

Sin, then, has consequences: death. We know what physical death is. It's not something we look forward to, but we all know it's inevitable; one day we'll all die. Spiritual death, on the other hand, is a reality afflicting each person all the time. Spiritual death is alienation from God, and it has a colour, a flavour we're all so very used to too – and we don't like it. In Paradise there was no suffering, no pain, no sickness, no friction, no tension, no weeds – and that's because in Paradise there was no alienation from God. But so holy is He that He pours out His judgments on our sins, and it's this displeasure of God that we taste in the suffering that makes up this broken life. Whether it be a struggle with cancer or with marital conflict or with wayward children or with environmental disaster – we're confronted with the righteous judgment of God on sin. That's this broken life: the heavy hand of God on sin.

But the good news of Scripture is that God's judgment on our sins is not the final word! This is the gospel of the *forgiveness* of sins. From the huge mass of humanity on Satan's side, the Father chose specific persons for salvation. To set them free from Satan's bondage He sent His only Son to earth. Jesus Christ went to the cross, and there experienced in a compressed time of three hours all the hellish agony that every sinner deserves eternally on account of his transgressions. Job suffered so incredibly much when he lost his possessions, his children, his health, his wife, his place in the community, and so much more – and his agony and suffering is only the beginning of what every sinner brings on himself through his sin. Job's friend Bildad was correct when he described God's judgments on sinners in the way he did in Job 18; sinners have no future, sinners have no peace in their hearts, sinners groan under the weight of God's anger. Yet even Job's suffering did not catch the full weight of the divine displeasure his sins deserved. It was Christ Jesus on the cross who felt the full weight of God's displeasure, and the result was that He suffered so much more than Job did and that any person ever living ever can. Just the thought of the coming suffering caused Him to break out in a sweat of such agony that the drops of sweat falling from His forehead were the size of blood drops dripping from your nose – and I challenge you to find me someone else who has sweated to that degree! On the cross His agony was so deep and heart-wrenching that He cried out His despair, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?!" Make no mistake, congregation: this is every bit what you and I deserve! The point is not whether we feel that way or whether public opinion would agree. The point is the holy identity of God! And this is His sovereign revelation.

But there was purpose in Christ's suffering. Notice the good news of Romans 5, where the apostle keeps using the little word 'for'. Vs 6: "Christ died *for* the ungodly." Vs 8: "While we were still sinners, Christ died *for* us." He suffered what I ought to suffer, so that I don't have to suffer it; He's my substitute! That's the gospel: *He in my place!* Glorious gospel indeed!

Yet there's more. Paul hastens to add the effect of Christ's work. Vs 9: "since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him!" *Saved from God's wrath:* isn't that an exciting thought! That's to be reconciled to God! Vs 10: "we were reconciled to [God] through the death of His Son...."

But if we're reconciled to God, if we're saved from the wrath of God, then we also "have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (vs 1). Peace! No more judgment, no more plagues, no more display of God's heavy hand upon us. Only peace, His favour, His smile! And we realise well that His smile means His blessing....

This, congregation, is the very heart of the gospel, this is the glorious gospel of the forgiveness of sins! Those transgressions of mine that provoke holy God to anger and attract His divine judgment in this life and the life to come are *washed away*, and the wonderful result in turn is that there's nothing in me that provokes God to anger against me anymore! O sure, I continue to sin, and God knows that so very well. But Jesus' blood covers my sin, and so God looks not at my sin but looks instead at Jesus'-suffering-in-my-place, and He considers Christ's agony to be my agony – so that I don't have to experience it again.

It's because this is what the Voice of the Good Shepherd sounds like that the people of God repeat this glorious gospel in the words of Question & Answer 56: "I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, nor my sinful nature, against which I have to struggle all my life, but will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ, so that I may never come into condemnation." No more anger from God, me precious in God's sight: how wonderfully, wonderfully rich! This is the good news the Lord has pressed upon me in the covenant he signified and sealed to me in holy baptism. And this is equally the good news the Lord would press on me again in the celebration of the Lord's Supper next Sunday. My sins forgiven: how rich!

But the Son of God, brothers and sisters, did more than obtain forgiveness for our sins. This same Redeemer has ascended into heaven and from His place on high gathers the elect of God into His church. These people are the body of the redeemed, that is, are the body of those who "expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood..." as Article 27 has it. That's the church: the gathering of *the redeemed*. Or, to say it in the words of our Lord's Day, the church is the gathering of those *whose sins are forgiven*. Sunday by Sunday the Voice of the Good Shepherd reassures the redeemed of this reality, and that's to say that the preaching of the gospel repeatedly presses on sinners that they are in fact reconciled to God, that there is no judgment left for them, that their sins are really forgiven so that they shall actually inherit life eternal. That's the church: the body of the forgiven, the body of the saved. Repeatedly *you* hear this good news of the Good Shepherd from the pulpit, and every time you hear it you are called to *respond*. The response the Good Shepherd seeks is that you follow Him, and in the circumstances that means that you embrace His good news of the forgiveness of your sins as true and real – and that's to say that you believe what the Lord tells you, lest you get left behind because of your refusal to follow the Voice of the Shepherd.

There's more still. Why does the world exist? Why has sovereign, holy God not passed final judgment on this world on account of its sin? That's simply because not all the elect of God have yet come to faith. To say it differently: the Lord gives space for sinners to repent, gives space for His elect to

submit to the Voice of the Good Shepherd, gives space for His church gathering work. According to the Bible, this world does not keep on existing because, well, it just happens to keep on turning, nor because people are so clever in keeping the environment healthy. But the Lord God keeps the world going for the benefit of the church, that is, keeps the world going so that the church of the Lord may grow. Society tells us, and the eye actually sees, that the church is on the outer, is hardly in the driver's seat of what makes society tick. The Lord speaks differently. The church is central to the Lord's plan for the world. Inasmuch as He has joined you to His church, you have a central place in the God's plan for the world. Talk about a privilege!

That brings us to our second point:

## ***2. The Consequence of this Forgiveness.***

If forgiveness of sins is such a wonderful thing, and those who belong to the church are forgiven of their sins, what does being forgiven look like??

The apostle Paul gives us the answer to that question in the passage we read from Philippians 2. He relates how the Son of God did not cling to His God-ness, but was content to humble Himself so as to become a man. More, in His humility He emptied Himself further and "became obedient to death – even death on a cross" (vs 8). This death on the cross, we understand, achieved the glorious gospel of forgiveness of our sins; His suffering on the cross was what I deserved – and He took it in my place.

But notice, congregation, the context in which the apostle mentions Christ's work. The catalyst for bringing it up is the selfishness present in the congregation of the Philippians. That selfishness is implicit in the instruction of vs 2-4, where Paul speaks about the need to be "one in spirit and purpose," more, "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility considers others better than yourselves." That the apostle would say in vs 4 that the Philippian Christians were to "look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" points up that in fact these Christians were not looking out for the well-being of others, but were in fact busy with themselves first of all. To be sure, that doesn't mean that there was no help or support for the other, but it does mean that whatever help and support there was for the other was selfishly motivated – I'll help you if it benefits me.... In that context Paul mentions what Christ did to obtain forgiveness of our sins, mentions His self-emptying for the undeserving. He does so with the express instruction of vs 5: "your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." In other words: selfless serving of the other.

The church, brothers and sisters, has caught this material in Question & Answer 55 of the Catechism. The church is the body of the redeemed, of the forgiven. But what is the 'chemistry' between the members of this body to look like? That chemistry is called the "communion of saints", and this communion of saints in turn –says our Lord's Day– has two aspects.

The first aspect describes the vertical, the relation these forgiven sinners have with God. All these believers have a relation with God, have "communion with Him" and so "share in all His treasures and gifts." What are those treasures and gifts? First of all and primarily, these treasures and gifts are the forgiveness of sins! As long as sin remains one cannot have communion with God – for God is too holy to tolerate sin; that's why we were driven out of Paradise to begin with. But Christ came to take sin away, and that good news of the forgiveness of sins is the very first and the very basic treasure any sinner receives from God. And on the basis of that forgiveness the child of God receives so much more, including that God is your Father, that you are an heir to life eternal, that death is no longer the enemy it was, that you are assured of your daily bread, and so much more. That's the sweat result of the Lord's self-emptying.

A second aspect follows. It's this, says Answer 55: "everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members." That, we understand, is the horizontal aspect, is the way people interact with people. This is simply the instruction of Philippians 2. The way Christ emptied Himself in order to redeem His people is the example the redeemed are to follow in their service to one another. That's to say: since we've freely received forgiveness of sins, we are in turn to be as gracious and helpful and forgiving and kind to others as God has been to us. It's all about serving the other, promoting the other's well-being, without regard to benefits for self. We catch the point: having forgiveness of sins *looks like something*; the forgiven cheerfully serve the other just as Jesus Christ has served them.

Here, congregation, I need to take you back to the *Belgic Confession*. Art 27 had described the church as "a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers" –and who are they?– "who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood..." The term 'salvation' describes the redemption the Lord has obtained for us from the judgment of God, and that judgment, of course, is the result of the fall into sin. Point: salvation is ultimately forgiveness of sins! Hence too the reference to being "washed by His blood". But if that's what the church is, Art 28 can draw out the consequence. This body of the redeemed, of the forgiven, must have, says that Article, a particular chemistry within itself. "All and everyone are obliged to ... *serve the edification of the brothers and sisters*, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body." Serve the edification: that, we realize, is the communion of saints in action. The redeemed are to *look* redeemed; the forgiven are to *look* forgiven in the way they serve others without regard to personal benefit.

So there's the question that arises from the gospel of the forgiveness of your sins. Christ Jesus has given you so very much through His self-emptying sacrifice, and the result is that your sins are washed away, you have peace with God, there is no judgment from Him upon you. Now then: do you *act* forgiven? Do you empty self in willing service for the benefit of the other – even if there is no gain for you?

Let me focus the question a bit differently. Does your spouse experience that you serve her (or him) in the same way that Christ emptied Himself to obtain your forgiveness? Or does your spouse in fact experience that you don't enjoy serving her/him, or that your service to her/him is driven by what you can get out of it for yourself? It's a question, perhaps, worth talking about together after the children have gone to bed....

The same question, of course, pertains to the young people. You've made profession of faith, you say. Well now, do your siblings see that you are ever so thankful for what the Lord has done to obtain forgiveness for your sins? That is, do they see you are eager to serve the others in your family, even as Christ emptied Himself for you? Or to they see you as selfish, living off others, expecting others to serve you but not readily serving others? Such selfishness is definitely human nature, but it's *fallen* human nature and is not according to what the Lord wants His church –and hence the families of the church– to look like. Perhaps a question worth talking about with your parents and your siblings: ask them whether they see you as selfish or as having the same attitude Christ had.

The picture is bigger. The Lord gathers His church in this world, and the people around you know well –at least they should know!– that you are a Christian, that the Lord has joined you to His church. And make no mistake: the world knows very well that the central message of the church revolves around Christ's death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. Very rightly does the world expect the people of the church to act forgiven. Well then, do the people on your street and at work, and even the people you meet on your Friday night out, see in your attitude to others that you are

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forgiven of your sins? Do they see you serving the other without regard to personal benefit, or do they see you as selfish and content to satisfy the deserves of the sinful flesh??

The Lord has joined you to His church, and that reality is an enormous privilege – simply because the church is the body of the redeemed, the forgiven. But it's possible to be chaff amongst the wheat, to be a hypocrite “mixed in the Church along with the good and yet ... not part of the Church, although ... outwardly in it.” Hence the responsibility that comes with the privilege of forgiveness: to belong to the body of the forgiven you need to *look* forgiven. And forgiveness looks like service, using all your gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.

You see, it's good and proper to spend time speaking about the church. And it's good and proper too to ensure that you are where the Lord wants you to be, in the church where the Voice of the Good Shepherd is heard. But when all is said and done, you need to *follow* the Voice of the Shepherd. His message cooks down to the good news of the forgiveness of sins. So: do you *act* forgiven, or do you hold a grudge against others? Do others see from your behaviour what the church of Jesus Christ is really all about??