

## The Doctrine of the Church in the Reformed Confessions - Dr. J. Faber

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### Introduction

Today we may receive our theological seminary from the good hand of God. Our seminary has been established by immigrants of Dutch extraction; or, rather, by Reformed immigrants of Dutch origin, by immigrants who in 1944, this year exactly twenty-five years ago, liberated themselves from suprascriptural decisions concerning covenant and baptism, and from the hierarchical domination of synods of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. The Canadian Reformed Churches, established by Reformed confessors of Dutch origin, have decided to establish their own training for the ministry.

The question may arise: is not the establishment of this seminary absolutely sectarian? And must the theological instruction given by this seminary not of necessity be of a sectarian nature? Is the establishment of a seminary by these few small churches not a sign of a narrow-mindedness?

Christians throughout all ages have confessed: I believe a holy, catholic church. This characteristic "catholic" has received much attention. The catholicity of the church was discussed in several official Anglican reports. The World Council of Churches, meeting in Uppsala in 1968, discussed the catholicity of the church at one of its main sessions. And lately many studies have been devoted to this theme.

We can narrow down the question as follows: is not the establishment of this seminary contrary to the catholicity of the church? Sectarianism and catholicism are incompatible, are they not? In this address we hope to deal with this question. It is obvious that the critical question we are raising has many aspects, and that many answers can be given. The issues of catholicity and sectarianism are relevant to the very existence of our churches.

One may also raise the question as being relevant to the relationship between church and seminary. A seminary is a training institute for the ministry. The Canadian Reformed Churches have established this seminary in order to train young men for the ministry in our churches. The Apostle Paul writes in the Epistle to Timothy: "You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses, entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:1,2).

If the question is raised: is the establishment of a seminary contrary to the catholicity of the church, we reply: a church acting in accordance with the Word of God can never be in conflict with a characteristic of the church. Reformed confessors have always maintained that the catholicity of the church is determined by the faithfulness to the infallible Word of God. If this seminary offers a thorough instruction in the holy writings of Old and New Testament it exists in accordance with the calling of the

church of Christ. Paul describes his work as follows: "Him we proclaim, warning *every* man and teaching *every* man in all wisdom, that we may present *every* man mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). The phrase "every man" is repeated three times. Is a more catholic ministry imaginable than a ministry which desires to "make the word of God fully known" (1:25)? Is anything more catholic imaginable than a seminary which desires to be subservient to the universal ministry of the Word of God?

In this connection one could discuss the critical approach to Holy Scripture, which in our day is very widespread and which infects many universities and colleges. The attack upon Holy Scripture is destructive to the catholicity of the church. And from the Old and New Testament disciplines one might find an answer to the issue which occupies our mind today: the establishment of a seminary and the catholicity of the church. You will not blame me if I try to find a solution to this issue from subjects entrusted to me: dogmatics and symbolics, that is to say, the study of the doctrine of the church and of its confessions. This approach directly touches upon the doctrinal foundation of our seminary as a whole and consequently of all instruction to be given at this institute.

The foundation of our seminary is the confession of the churches which called this school into existence. When the members of the faculty signed the Form of Subscription they promised that their instruction would be in agreement with the doctrine of the Canadian Reformed Churches. You will find this doctrine in the three Forms of Unity: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. The question which occupies us can therefore also be formulated as follows: is acceptance of this foundation, this basis, not in conflict with the catholicity of the church?

You will understand how important this question is. All the teaching at our seminary must be directed by the accepted foundation. And if one asks whether this seminary is sectarian, one should first of all investigate its foundation. Is the foundation of our seminary sectarian, or is it catholic in the proper sense of the word?

Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, argues that a confession has limited and relative value. A confession has validity in a certain area only. The implication of this viewpoint is, of course, that a confession as confession lacks a definite catholic character. It might be possible to attribute catholicity to the creeds of the early church: the Niceno-Constantinopolitanum, the so-called Athanasian Creed, and the Apostles' Creed. We usually call these creeds ecumenical or catholic creeds. We distinguish them from the confessions which originated after the Reformation of the sixteenth century. By making a distinction between those two types of symbols, do we not concede that the Reformed confessions lack the characteristic of catholicity? And is Karl Barth not right when he says that a confession has only limited and relative value?

We could still probe further: are their names not typically limited? We call our confession the *Belgic* Confession, and Belgium is a small country in Europe. We speak of the *Heidelberg* Catechism; Heidelberg is a city in Germany. Our third Form of Unity is called the Canons of *Dort*, and Dordrecht is only an insignificant provincial town in the Netherlands. Superficially speaking, one might say: it is obvious, the matter has been resolved. Here is a seminary which has as its basis the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. It must be a sectarian seminary, for its basis is extremely narrow. Is

anything more narrow-minded than these three Forms of Unity? In Hamilton they place themselves outside the mainstream of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. At the most one could appreciate the establishment of their seminary as an indication that these Canadian Reformed people are still sentimentally involved with, and interested in, their European, Dutch past.

Ladies and gentlemen, the matter is quite clear. We shall give an answer to the questions raised and the objections voiced against the opening of our seminary. It will be obvious that we have to limit ourselves. We want to limit ourselves to a discussion of the Belgic Confession. A discussion of the catholicity of the Heidelberg Catechism or of the universality of the Canons of Dort would also have been possible; however, we limit ourselves to the Belgic Confession. It is the most systematic exposition of the doctrine of the Canadian Reformed Churches and consequently of the basis of our seminary. I speak to you about the catholicity of the Belgic Confession. First we wish to investigate the meaning of the word "catholicity." Then we intend to narrow down our theme to one particular aspect of the word "catholicity." We shall further try to show the catholicity of the Belgic Confession in some particular instances; and, finally, we shall endeavour to indicate the meaning of the catholicity of the Belgic Confession for the work at our seminary.

### **The Word "Catholicity"**

The word "catholicity" is of Greek origin. It is composed of the pronoun *kata* and the adjective *holos*. *Holos* means "whole," "that which constitutes a whole." "Catholic" therefore means "relative to the whole," "common," "general." "Catholic" is that which exists in its fulness. In secular Greek we meet the word for the first time in Hippocrates, the father of medical science. He calls an illness which causes the whole body to suffer, a "catholic" illness. It is an illness which is spread throughout the body. In this connection one could make the statement: the word "catholic" has a *spatial* dimension.

The word is also used to indicate the *temporal* dimension. Philodemus discusses "catholic" traditions and the Greek author Polybios writes about "catholic history," history right from the beginning. So the word "catholic" in Greek means "general," "universal": it is related to a whole; this relationship can be of a geographical as well as of a temporal nature. In addition, it has the meaning "perfect," "complete," "in fulness," "exactly as it has to be." Perhaps the best translation yet is "all-encompassing." It is good to notice that the geographical or spatial dimension is not the only aspect of the concept of "catholicity." For this aspect, the Greek language prefers to use the word "ecumenical." The Roman Empire was not called "catholic" but "ecumenical." In this connection we are reminded of Caesar Augustus' decree that the whole *oikoumene*, the entire inhabited world, had to be taxed. The word "ecumenical" indicates only a particular aspect of catholicity, namely, the spatial or the geographical aspect. The word "ecumenical" has a *quantitative* connotation, while in the word "catholic" the *qualitative* element--or rather, the *normative* element--is predominant. It concerns the whole as it is supposed to be.

### **"Catholicity" in the History of the Church**

We now come to the Christian use of the word. Only a few years after the conclusion of the New Testament the expression "catholic church" was coined. Ignatius of Antioch used it for the first time in A.D. 110. Ignatius was a minister of the Word who died as a martyr for Christ. In a letter to the church of Smyrna he warns the congregation to listen to the overseer of the church-the minister of the Word of God-and to submit to the elders: "Where the bishop [or: overseer] is present there let the congregation gather, just as where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church." [2] It is difficult to assess what exactly Ignatius meant when he spoke of the "catholic church." Did he have in mind the *universal* church, the church which is dispersed over all the earth? Or did he mean the *totality* of the church, the church as a whole, and did he look upon the local church as a section of that great body? Or did he have in mind the totality of the *doctrine*, to be kept and proclaimed by the church? Or did he wish to express the *fulness* and comprehensiveness of the true church by calling it "catholic"? This much is clear: Ignatius spoke Christologically: "Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church." Christ determines the catholicity of the church. This reminds us of what Calvin later would write: whosoever wants to speak about the church should first speak about the Lord Jesus Christ. Otherwise he acts just like the man who, in order to get to know another person, looks at his shoes instead of at his head. Christ is the Head of the church, and if someone wishes to know the church, he should learn to know Christ, the Head of the church, and Him we know from Holy Writ. In the same manner we know the catholic church from Scripture. [3]

We cannot investigate the entire history of the concept of the catholicity of the church. We shall only mention the ideas of two church fathers, one from the East and one from the West. From the East we take Cyril of Jerusalem. He explained the creed of Jerusalem to his catechumens. In the eighteenth lecture he deals with the church, and he explains the word "catholic" as follows:

*"The Church, then, is called Catholic because it is spread through the whole world, from one end of the earth to the other, and because it never stops teaching in all its fulness every doctrine that men ought to be brought to know: and that regarding things visible and invisible, in heaven and on earth. It is called Catholic also because it brings into religious obedience every son of men, rulers and ruled, learned and simple, and because it is a universal treatment and cure for every kind of sin whether perpetrated by soul or body, and possesses within it every form of virtue that is named, whether it expresses itself in deeds or words or in spiritual graces of every description. [4]*

Cyril presents several meanings of the word "catholic." The nuances vary according to the "whole" (*holon*) to which one relates the church: all of the world in a geographical sense, the totality of all the different groups of mankind, the totality of revelation, the totality of the spiritual gifts, the totality of human sin and the totality of the healing from sin.

The well-known Reformed dogmatician, Herman Bavinck, closely followed Cyril in his description of "catholicity." In 1888 Bavinck delivered an address entitled "De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk" (The Catholicity of Christendom and Church). In this speech he said:

*The church fathers use the word "catholicity" mainly in a threefold sense. First they indicate the church as a whole and a unity in distinction from the dispersed local churches, which are part of it: the local church can be designated as a catholic church when it seeks unity with the catholic church. Then they*

*express with the word "catholicity" that the church is one, and without exception comprises all believers from all nations, from all ages and from all places; here "catholic" stands in contrast to the national church of Israel. And finally it is called "catholic" because it possesses the perfect tradition, all the dogmata that man must know concerning invisible and visible things, without any defect, because it' heals all sins of body and soul, brings forth all virtues and good works, and partakes of all spiritual gifts (Cyril, Catech. 18). [5]*

It is obvious that Bavinck felt a close affinity to the universal concept of "catholicity" as presented by Cyril of Jerusalem. Bavinck used this concept in order to combat the Roman Catholic dualism between nature and grace. In Bavinck, the catholicity of Christendom especially indicated the unity of creation and redemption, the unity of the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Our second representative, the one from the Western church, is Augustine. He is the preacher of the catholicity of the church who defended it over against the Donatists. They were inclined to limit the true church to northern Africa. Augustine opposed this limitation and gave full attention to the catholicity of the church in its spatial or geographical aspect. He exclaimed somewhere: "I do not know who limits this love to Africa. Expand your love over all the world if you desire to love Christ; for the members of Christ are spread all over the world . " [6]

Augustine was also deeply impressed by the fact that the church is gathered from the beginning of the world to its end. Though he never, as far as I know, used the word "catholicity" in this connection, he spoke time and again of the *ecclesia ab Abel*, the church from Abel. Abel and Cain are the first-in-time of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. This idea of the church originating in the days of Abel was adopted by Luther and Calvin. We also find this in the confessions of the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century.

In this connection we are reminded of Lord's Day 21 of our Heidelberg Catechism. The question is there: what do you believe concerning the *holy catholic church* of Christ? And the answer is: that the Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers a church for Himself. The Heidelberg Catechism confesses the social and geographical as well as the temporal catholicity. The words "out of the whole human race" remind us of the promise delivered to the patriarchs: "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give to your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen. 26:4). This promise is fulfilled in Christ, for "he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility . . ." (Eph. 2:14). In the Book of Revelation we hear the song: "For thou wast slain and by thy blood didst thou ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation . . ." (5:9). In Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism the temporal catholicity is also mentioned: the church is gathered from the beginning of the world to its end. The personal experience of the author of Psalm 71 is also the communal experience of all God's people: "O God, from my youth thou hast taught me, and I still proclaim thy wondrous deeds" (71:17). Through Isaiah God promises His people: "My spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children's children, says the LORD, from this time forth and for evermore" (59:21).

We confess the *indefectibilitas* of the church. It is gathered due to the sovereign will of the God of election. No one shall snatch the sheep out of the hand of Christ (Jn. 10:28). The powers of death shall not prevail against the church of Christ (Mt. 16:18). We confess in the Canons of Dort;

*This counsel, proceeding from eternal love for the elect, has from the beginning of the world to the present time been powerfully fulfilled, and will also continue to be fulfilled, though the gates of hell vainly try to frustrate it. In due time the elect will be gathered together into one, and there will always be a Church of believers, founded on the blood of Christ. This Church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve Him as her Saviour (who as a bridegroom for his bride laid down His life for her on the cross) and celebrate His praises here and through all eternity [II, 91.*

Admittedly, over against Roman Catholicism the Reformation always strongly emphasized the *normative* character of the catholicity of the church. The promise of Christ is, according to Calvin, fulfilled in the way of faith and repentance. Precisely because the, Roman Catholic Church lacked the obedience of faith, the Reformed people could no longer acknowledge the Roman church as the truly catholic church. Reformation, however, is not revolution in the sense that the Anabaptists wished to bring it about. Reformation was the restoration of the catholic church according to the infallible Word of God. Luther changed the word "catholic" into "Christian"; Calvin, however, held on to the word "catholic." "Evangelical" or "Reformed" does not stand opposed to "catholic"; on the contrary, "evangelical" or "Reformed" is truly "catholic" in the proper sense of the word.

The Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century instead stressed *quantitative* catholicity. Did not the church of Rome have the most members? Was the church of Rome not scattered all over the world? And was not, therefore, the Roman church the catholic church? The Reformed confessors of the sixteenth century knew how to deal with this argumentation. They said: in Holy Scripture the majority is usually not on the side of the truth, but on the opposite side. Remember Israel in the days of Ahab and Elijah and in the days of the Lord Jesus Christ. The catholicity of the church is not determined by the number as such; it is not an exclusively quantitative concept.

And, as to the second point, the geographical extension: it is true that the promise of God states that the church is gathered out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. But when the church was still only in Jerusalem it was already the catholic church, even though it was still limited to this one city. Holy Scripture tells us about this church: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

The catholicity of the church is not determined only in a quantitative sense, but in a qualitative, or, rather, a normative sense. Catholicity is closely connected to holiness and apostolicity. One may not drive a wedge between the characteristics of the church and its marks.

### **The Belgic Confession: Geographical and Cultural Catholicity**

We will now deal more specifically with the catholicity of the Belgic Confession. First of all, it should be noted that the original title of this confession was, "True Christian Confession, Containing the Summary

of the Doctrine of God and of the Eternal Salvation of Man." The Synod of Dort added a few words: True Christian Confession *of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands*. It did this for political reasons. Guido de Brés, the author of the Confession, had simply called it: True Christian' Confession. It is quite obvious that he did not consider the Confession of the Reformed people in the Netherlands a sectarian specialty, or a confession for one land, one nation, one language only. Certainly not! "True Christian Confession" indicates a presentation of the catholic, undoubted Christian faith.

We usually call this confession the Belgic Confession because it originated in the Southern Netherlands now known as Belgium. But Guido de Brés wrote his confession in the *French* language. Our Canadian Reformed Churches use a translation; and so do our sister churches in the Netherlands. Both of us have a translation of the French original, albeit in a different language. But just as the Belgic Confession did not lose its significance when the Reformed churches were limited to the Northern Netherlands, so also it retains its value in the English language and in the English-speaking countries. In our age of satellite communication the English language will become still more significant for the transfer of culture and ideas.

The geographical catholicity of the church is also confessed in Article 27:

This 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. [7]

The catholic church is not confined, bound, or limited to Rome: the Roman Catholic Church is not the true catholic church. The catholic church is also not confined, bound, or limited to Wittenberg, Geneva, Kampen, or Hamilton. It is spread and dispersed over the *whole* world; however, this geographical catholicity is qualified as truly Christian by the phrase, "joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith." [8] The church is qualified in this manner since it is determined by the obedience of faith, obedience to the infallible Word of God in Holy Scripture.

Article 27 concludes with the confession of the geographical catholicity of the church, but it begins with the qualitative or normative catholicity: the one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ. Thus the Belgic Confession is a catholic confession. Its history and its contents indicate that its scope and significance is not limited to one continent or to one language. We who accept this confession as a Scriptural expression of the true faith, are not embarrassed by its origin and content. And a seminary which accepts this confession as the first of its doctrinal standards, can never be regarded as a sectarian institute. May the Lord grant that also through the work of our seminary this true Christian confession may be heard in the English speaking countries to the praise of God and the salvation of mankind. For this confession contains the summary of the doctrine of God and the eternal salvation of man.

### **The Belgic Confession: Temporal Catholicity**

After having discussed the catholicity of the Belgic Confession in its geographical and cultural aspects, we now want to proceed to a discussion of the temporal catholicity. The church of God existed already before the Reformation of the sixteenth century. This is indicated by the name "Reformation": the Reformation of the church is not its inauguration. The church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end (An. 27).

This temporal catholicity is connected with the indefectibility of the church; the church cannot be brought to naught, due to God's eternal election, the work of Christ, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit (cf. Canons of Dort, V, 8). Article 27 of the Belgic Confession says about this: "This holy Church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man." Then follows the well-known reference to the "seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal." [9] They were preserved not by their own strength, but it was the Lord who preserved for Himself seven thousand persons.

The Belgic Confession does not only *confess* this temporal catholicity of the church; it also presents some *examples*. Again, not in a Roman Catholic manner. The history of the church is not normative (cf. Art. 7). But the Confession accepts tradition as far as it results from Holy Scripture and is based on that Word of God. This is apparent from the terminology used by the Belgic Confession. As a confession it does not quote Christian authors from previous centuries. A confession is not a scientific exposition. One will not find the name of Augustine in the Confession. One will, however, find names of heretics rejected by the Christian church of all ages. In the last paragraph of Article 9, the Church confesses the following:

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been maintained and preserved in the true Church since the time of the apostles to this very day, over against Jews, Muslims, and against false Christians and heretics such as Marcion, Mani, Praxeas, Sabellius, Paul of Samosata, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. In this doctrine, therefore, we willingly receive the three creeds, of the Apostles, of Nicea, and of Athanasius; likewise that which in accordance with them is agreed upon by the early fathers. [10]

In Article 12, the article dealing with creation, the church confesses that it rejects "the error of the Manichees, who say that the devils were not created, but have their origin of themselves, and that without having become corrupted, they are wicked by their own nature." [11] Following the confession of man's being incapable of doing what is truly good and the confession of original sin, the conclusion is: "In this regard we reject the error of the Pelagians, who say that this sin is only a matter of imitation" (Art. 15). [12]

The catholicity of the Belgic Confession becomes first of all evident negatively in the rejection of heresies, condemned by the Christian church of all ages on the basis of the Word of God. Someone familiar with the spiritual climate of our time and contending for the faith of the true church, knows that this means that this confession is timely. Many new heresies are nothing but old heresies in new vesture.

Positively the catholicity of the church becomes manifest in that the Belgic Confession consciously seeks continuity with the decisions and decrees of the early church. This is not only apparent with respect to



the confession of God (Arts. 1, 8 -11), but also with respect to that of our Lord Jesus Christ, His incarnation (Art. 18), and the union and the distinction of the two natures in the Person of Christ (Art. 19). It is more than evident that the Belgic Confession seeks close contact with the Councils of Chalcedon (451) and of Constantinople (381 and 680). That is not all. Someone rightly wrote:

In its Christology the Confession literally quotes the epistles of Pope Damasus I and Pope Leo the Great, renders the contents of the decrees of Nicea and Chalcedon, and even combines the Western and Eastern approach to the atoning work of Christ. [\[13\]](#)

There is not only a close affinity with the official doctrinal decisions of the early catholic church. There is also a bond with the early Christian authors. Many examples could be given. We mention only a few. In Article 18 it is confessed that the Son of God truly and completely has assumed human nature. As proof for this statement the Confession adds: "For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary that He should assume both to save both." Here we hear a sentence of the Greek church father Gregory of Nazianze.

In Article 19 of the Belgic Confession we read: "Even though, by His resurrection, He [the Son of God], has given immortality to His human nature, He has not changed its reality, since our salvation and resurrection also depend on the reality of His body." [\[14\]](#) It is clear from Calvin's Institutes---one of the main sources for the Belgic Confession that we owe this formulation to Augustine. Augustine taught that Christ indeed has given immortality to His flesh, but that He did not deprive it of its true nature (Inst. IV.xvii.24). The fact that "our salvation and resurrection also depend on the reality of His body" has been forcefully testified by Irenaeus and Tertullian over against Gnosticism.

You will understand that it is at this point impossible to deal with all the quotations of the church fathers in the Belgic Confession. It contains expressions of ancient Christian authors from East as well as West. There are statements from Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Cyprian, Jerome, and Bernard of Clairvaux.

There is one church father, however, who is very prominent in the Belgic Confession: Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. This is clear especially from the doctrinal statement on the providence of God (Art. 13). There is also a connection between Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and the Scriptural

teaching of the Confession concerning the total depravity of man, and God's free grace in Christ. With our Confession we are not an isolated community. To be sure, we are isolated as far as the great majority of so-called Christians is concerned; isolated as far as the majority of denominations is concerned; isolated with respect to the World Council of Churches and Rome; but not isolated from the catholic church of Christ, the church "of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit" (Art. 27). [\[15\]](#) We are not isolated from Augustine, whom we would rather call "a brother in Christ" than a "father in the church." Our Belgic Confession says: with our confession of the sovereign grace of God "we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is by His grace that He crowns His gifts" (Art. 24). [\[16\]](#) These are words of Augustine that were abused by the Council of Trent, and still are not accepted by Rome, but that fit exactly into a Reformational creed. That we may do good works, as people redeemed by Christ and

strengthened by the Holy Spirit, is a gift of God.

Also the confession concerning the Lord's Supper and Holy Baptism is truly catholic. The comparison between circumcision and baptism in Article 34, is already found in the early church, among others in Augustine. From him originates the expression "to be entirely committed to Him [God and Christ] whose mark and emblem we bear." [17] A typically early Christian and catholic image is that of "the precious blood of the Son of God, which is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and enter into the spiritual land of Canaan." [18]

In the early Christian church Leviticus 12 was used as an illustration of the necessity of infant baptism. Article 34 refers to this when it says:

Christ shed His blood to wash the children of believers just as much as He shed it for adults. Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them, as the Lord commanded in the law that a lamb was to be offered shortly after children were born This was a sacrament of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. [19]

The catholicity of the Belgic Confession also here means that it is timely over against modern Anabaptism which is prevalent on this continent.

### **The Belgic Confession: A Catholic Foundation**

I am convinced that the examples have indicated the truly catholic character of our Confession. The Belgic Confession has not rejected the witness of the early church. The true church of God is the "pillar and bulwark of the truth" (I Tim. 3:15). As temple of the Spirit, as dwelling place of God, it must be built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). In this building tradition should not be condemned, but always be tested by the doctrine of the apostles. We confess the communion of saints, a communion not only of our own day and age, but also a communion with previous generations. For that reason we desire to be catholic and we desire to speak in a catholic manner, as does the Belgic Confession. Because the Belgic Confession is in accordance with the Word of God it is catholic. Rooted and grounded in love, we, *with all the saints*, shall be able to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:17-19).

Guido de Brés once wrote, "Let us rejoice in the possession of the true, ancient doctrine of prophets, apostles, and church teachers." [20] Let us, in all humility, rejoice indeed. The grace of God has turned the hearts of the fathers to the children (Lk. 1: 17). He did this not only in the days of John the Baptist, but also in the days of the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century. He did this again in the Netherlands in the days of Secession, Doleantie, and Liberation. The Liberation, now a quarter of a century ago, was not a sectarian narrowing down of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. The

Liberation aimed at being catholic; and, indeed, it was catholic. It was catholic in its condemnation of suprascriptural doctrinal decisions and in its maintenance of the traditional character of the Reformed churches. The Liberation was catholic in its renewal of the glorious binding to the truth of the Word of God, confessed in the three Forms of Unity.

Today we receive this seminary from the good hand of our God, our Father in Christ. This institution will serve for the training of young men for this glorious office: the office of the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19). This seminary will prepare young men to become ambassadors for Christ. We are ambassadors for Christ, Paul says; and all true servants of Christ agree with him. "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:20,21).

Is the establishment of this seminary a continuation of sectarianism? Should we not be embarrassed when we are told that we are sectarians? No, certainly not. Admittedly, we are embarrassed-to use an expression used by Abraham Kuyper at the occasion of the opening of the Free University-when we consider our "crew," our own insignificance. But we are not embarrassed when we consider the foundation of our seminary. The foundation is catholic. It is our truly ecumenical task to maintain that foundation in all our teaching. Then we are not narrowminded, but find ourselves in the world-wide and age-old communion of the catholic church. Then we are not bound in an unscientific way, but then we live in the freedom of Christ, a freedom consisting of being bound to the infallible Word of God. This bond is not unscientific; it is no slavery. The Confession uses catholic language when it tells us that "the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in Holy Scripture at length. It is, therefore, unlawful for any one, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scriptures" (Art. 7). [21] This catholic language is the language of this Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches. May it remain this way in the future. And may, also through your prayer, the work at this seminary be subservient to the gathering of all the saints, of all those whom the Father elected, the Son redeemed and the Holy Spirit sanctifies.

May also through the work of this seminary the day come near of which we confess in Article 37 that it is the time ordained by the Lord, when the number of the elect will be complete. Then the catholic church will be there, a bride without spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:27), the great multitude which no one can number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues (Rev. 7:9). "And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, 'To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!'" (Rev. 5:13).

At the opening of this seminary we conclude with the Belgic Confession: "Therefore we look forward to that great day with a great longing to enjoy to the full the promises of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" [22]

## Footnotes

[1] Inaugural speech at the opening of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches on September 10, 1969. The original Dutch version was published under the title "Het katholieke karakter van de Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis," *The Canadian Reformed Magazine* 18 (Sept. 20-27, Oct. 4-11, 18, Nov. 1, 8, 1969), and has been translated by F. Kouwenhoven. Cf. J. Faber, "De katholiciteit der Confessie:" *De Reformatie* 37 (Nov. 11, 1961), 44-45.

[2] *Smyrn.* 8.2. Quoted from C.C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 115.

[3] *Corpus Reformatorum*, eds. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss (Brunswick, 1863-1900). 35,612; cf. *Ibid.*, 35, 30.

[4] William Telfer, ed., *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press- 1955). 186.

[5] H. Bavinck, *De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk* (1888; repr., Kampen: Kok, 1968), 1.

[6] J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus*, series latina (Paris, 1864), 35,2060 (*ad Ep. I In. 10:8*).

[7] *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg: Premier, 1984), 461.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*, 446.

[11] *Ibid.*, 448.

[12] *Ibid.*, 451.

[13] A.D.R. Polman, "Bij het vierde eeuwgetijde der Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis II," *Gereformeerd Weekblad* 17 (Nov. 10, 1961), 145.

[14] *Book of Praise*, 454.

[15] *Ibid.*, 461.

[16] *Ibid.*, 458.

[17] *Ibid.*, 466.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*, 467.

[20] Quoted in C. Vonk, *De voorzeide leer* (Barendrecht: Barendrecht, 1955), 3a:54.

[21] *Book of Praise*, 443-444.

[ 22] *Ibid.*, 472.