

## 2. Characteristics and Responsibility: an Irreconcilable Tension?

The work of Triune God in gathering His church on Planet Earth is a wonderful and encouraging reality; despite life's brokenness and mankind's hostility, this work continues unabated – and is even the axle on which the history of the world turns. In this lecture I want to draw out in further detail a number of characteristics of this glorious church, and then set beside those characteristics how God would have us respond to –and even participate in– the work He is doing.

### Characteristics

For centuries Christians have embraced the four characteristics mentioned in the Nicene Creed (written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD); the church is “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.”

#### One

From the beginning of the world the Father had ordained to save particular people to eternal life. He gave these people not to many potential saviors but to one. This one Son came into this fallen world to “*save His people*” –that’s all the elect– “*from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). So Jesus could tell His disciples, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Accordingly, Peter after Pentecost assured the Jewish Council that there were not multiple ways to be saved but only one; “*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12).

This emphasis on *oneness* is not new. Directly after the fall into sin, the Lord God told the serpent in the hearing of Adam and Eve that He would place “*enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring,*” and then added this promise, “*he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). One offspring of the woman would inflict the mortal wound that would destroy the serpent and so provide redemption for sinners. When God called Abram out of Ur, He gave this promise: “*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” (Genesis 12:3). The word “*you*” is a reference to the one man Abram; blessing for all shall come from one source.

God delivered one people from bondage in Egypt. He did not divide this one people into several subgroups, then lead one group east, another south and a third west, and at various mountains to the east, south and west establish different covenants with different conditions and commitments; rather, he took this one people through one Red Sea to one Mt Sinai, and there established with the entire nation one covenant of grace. He spoke to them all when he said, “*You shall be my treasured possession among all peoples...; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exodus 19:5,6). To this one people God gave instruction to build one tabernacle that would proclaim the one way God had ordained for sinners to be reconciled to the Father – and that is through the death of an animal in place of sinners (Exodus 25-30). The priests and Levites, consequently, were directed to teach one way of salvation to this one people of God. Repeatedly in the Old Testament the prophets called the people of Israel back to this one message of redemption, and insisted that the people serve the one true God in the one manner He had revealed. The angel’s description of Jesus’ task is then no surprise, nor is Jesus’ insistence that He alone is “*the way and the truth and the life*” (John 14:6).

## Post Confession Classes - The Church – Magnificent or Confusing?

Lecture 2 of Series - Rev. Clarence Bouwman – Presented - Oct.10, 2012 - Smithville Ont.

---

The further teaching of the New Testament on the subject is very much in keeping with the picture uncovered thus far. Jesus told Peter that *“on this rock I will build my church”* (Matthew 16:18) – and spoke of the church in the singular; He would build one church, not many. Just before His suffering on the cross, He prayed these words in the hearing of His disciples, *“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father are in me and I in you..., that they may be one even as we are one”* (John 17:20-22) – and the Father, of course, hears the Son’s prayer. Paul reminded his readers that *“there is one body and one Spirit –just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call– one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all”* (Ephesians 4:4-6). In his vision on Patmos John saw the unity distinctly; *“after this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number ... standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes”* (Revelation 7:9) and, *“Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads”* (Revelation 14:1). The 144,000 (the number is symbolic, and depicts the totality of the elect of Old and New Testament alike) are together, one crowd on Mt Zion.

It’s certainly true that we today do not see that unity; instead, we see so much division and brokenness. But if the picture of Scripture is that the Lord builds one church, then I believe it is so.... In the midst of the fogginess and confusion my eye sees, I’ll do my utmost to see, in faith, the contours of the Lord’s work – and wait with eager expectation for the Lord to open my eyes on the last day to see fully the unity of the one church He is gathering.

### Holy

The fall into sin corrupted the entire human race, so that all people were *“foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasure, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another”* (Titus 2:3). The people God gathered around Mt Sinai, however, were *“a holy nation”* (Exodus 19:6). Paul describes *“the church of God that is in Corinth”* as *“those sanctified in Christ Jesus”* (1 Corinthians 1:2; cf 3:17). The term ‘holy’ (or ‘sanctified’; the two words translate the same Greek root) catches the notion of being changed, made different from what one used to be and so being different from those not (yet) changed. This change is the mighty work of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ; those washed by His blood are also changed by His Holy Spirit. The assembly of the redeemed, then, is invariably a *“holy nation”* (1 Peter 2:9).

In this broken life, the holiness of the church does not equate to perfection. The Lord God instructed His people assembled at Mt Sinai to *“be holy, for I am holy”* (Leviticus 11:44; see 19:2; 20:7,26; 21:8). Repeatedly the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament insisted that those who were holy in fact had to *be* holy – and spelled out that sins required repentance and sinful habits needed to change. Those whom the Holy Spirit has sanctified can will what is right, but the wherewithal to perform it rightly (and even will it rightly!) remains so weak and so lacking (see Romans 7:14-25).

What I in this broken life, then, see of the church is such a far cry from the holiness I’d prefer to see. Yet if the Lord typifies His church as holy, it will not do to stare myself blind at its brokenness; I need instead to learn to see the church as a work-in-progress that Christ as its Head already qualifies as ‘holy’. With the eye of faith I can already see the contours of that holiness, for its members –be it with so much weakness– resist sin and bring forth the fruits of the Spirit. With longing I look forward to the day of Christ’s return, when the church’s holiness will be obvious for every eye to see.

## Catholic

The term 'catholic' as a characteristic of the church describes the fact that the Lord's church-gathering work is *worldwide*. It's worldwide (or universal) in the sense that it covers every continent and country and tribe; it's universal also in the sense that it spans every decade and century of earth's history. (To be clear, this does not mean that the church exists in every tribe or country in any given generation of earth's history, as will become clearer below.)

When God called Abram to be His, He told him, "*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (Genesis 12:3). Not just Jews, then, but also Moabites and Egyptians and Romans and Chinese and Argentinians would receive a blessing through Abram. This blessing would not be limited to those peoples living in Abram's day, but would span the generations to include "*all the families of the earth*". In line with this promise, the people of Israel were taught to sing of the many peoples who found a home in the temple (and hence its gospel) in Zion: "*among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Cush*" (Psalm 87:4). We read in the pages of the Old Testament of Rahab and Ruth being joined to the people of the Lord and Uriah the Hittite finding a place among them too. The prophet Isaiah spoke of how the Egyptians and the Assyrians would worship the Lord God together (Isaiah 19:19-25). In keeping with that perspective of the Old Testament, the Lord Jesus Christ before His ascension told His disciples that "*all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" and "*therefore*" they were to "*go ... and make disciples of all nations*" (Matthew 28:18,19). All nations on Planet Earth are "*under His feet*" (Ephesians 1:22), and so He is able to gather from any tribe and race anyone whom the Father has given to Him. The disciples, therefore, were sent "*to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8), and the result of their labor (and of those who came after them) was that the "*great multitude*" John saw assembled on the last day came "*from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*" (Revelation 7:9). Rich and poor, black and white, kings and slaves – folk of any conceivable standing receive a place in the church of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:28). Since the elect the Father gave to the Son are not taken only from one language group or from one race, we may not be surprised to find the church in any given villa or suburb of Planet Earth. That's its catholicity. Everywhere that church believes the same essential doctrine of Jesus Christ crucified for sinners.

## Un-over-seeable

The fact that the church is catholic does not make the church invisible. It is undoubtedly true that there are invisible aspects to the church. A much better term to use in this context is that the church is *not over-see-able*. Spread as it is over all the earth, and spanning as it does all generations, there is no human being able to see the entirety of the church the Lord is gathering. Its sheer size and scope means too that no one may rightly expect the church in one generation or location to look and feel exactly the same as the church does in other location or did in a previous generation. God's work is simply too *beyond* us for that.

To illustrate the point, consider the ocean. No one standing on Canada's western shore can see the entire Pacific Ocean, nor can anyone standing in Hawaii or in Australia; the ocean is simply too vast for finite man to oversee in one glance. This 'catholicity' of the ocean does not make the ocean invisible, but it certainly makes it un-over-seeable.

The ocean's catholicity, however, does not negate its oneness. Wherever one dips into the ocean one finds that the water is always wet, always salty, and always in motion; there is distinct unity within the catholicity of the ocean. Similarly, wherever one checks

## Post Confession Classes - The Church – Magnificent or Confusing?

Lecture 2 of Series - Rev. Clarence Bouwman – Presented - Oct. 10, 2012 - Smithville Ont.

---

out the church of the Lord one finds faith in Jesus Christ, members sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and preaching in keeping with Holy Scripture. But the water temperature off Canada's coast is not the same as the temperature of the Pacific off Australia's coast, and off Hawaii it's different again. Though the ocean is in constant motion, the currents off Canada's coast are not identical to the currents near Hawaii or around Australia – to say nothing of the difference in surf between Hawaii and, say, Australia's Gold Coast. In the same way, the way churches in one culture express the faith and do their liturgy will never be an exact copy of how churches of another culture express that same faith or do their liturgy. There is no tension between the catholicity of the church and her unity, but catholicity certainly does not mean that the church is uniform –one in temperature and in wave action– irrespective of culture or generation. This reality must make us cautious in faulting another church for the differences it has from the way we do things in our location or generation.

I referred a moment ago to the fact that there are invisible aspects to the church (in distinction from un-over-seeable). The ocean is obviously visible, but its saltiness is distinctly invisible. So too (at least from the shore) are the currents and so much of its marine life; one needs other ways to determine how the currents move and where the fish are in the depths of the ocean. The same is true in relation to the church. Like salt, one cannot see faith – though faith, like salt, is certainly detectable. As there is something invisible about the currents to the person in the boat, so too there is something invisible about the spiritual growth happening in the hearts of the church's Young People. Even so, the astute observer will notice the effect of the current on his boat, even as he will notice the change happening in the hearts of the Young People.

### Apostolic

The fourth characteristic of the church the Lord is gathering centers on the teaching aspect of the church and hence on the faith its members embrace. Jesus devoted three years to teaching and preaching, with focus on the inner group of twelve, whom He later sent out to “*make disciples of all nations*” (Matthew 28:19). He assured them that “*the Spirit of truth ... will guide you into all the truth*” (John 16:13). Consequently, after the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost, the 12 apostles went out preaching and teaching the one gospel of Jesus Christ crucified for sinners. It was the preaching of (one of) the twelve that spawned the repentance of so many on the Day of Pentecost and growth of the church in Jerusalem. It was through the work of the apostles (with Paul numbered among them) that brought about the church in Gentile cities as Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, etc. So Paul can tell the Ephesian saints that “*you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets*” (Ephesians 2:19,20; cf Revelation 21:14). The church is built on the teaching the Lord Jesus Christ passed on to His disciples; the faith of its members in any culture and generation is always fundamentally the same as Jesus spoke of to His disciples.

It is worthy noting that this faith is not limited to the New Testament dispensation. At Mt Sinai God revealed a specific teaching concerning Israel's sinful and lost condition, and had revealed too how such sinners as they were could be reconciled to God and even be His people. God could live amongst an undeserving people in the Holy of Holies in the back of the tabernacle because animals would continuously be sacrificed on the altar located strategically between the tabernacle and the people. Those animals foreshadowed the coming of “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (cf John 1:29). That is why Jesus could say concerning the Scriptures of His day, “*it is they that bear witness about me*” (John 5:39). On the road to Emmaus after His resurrection from the dead, “*beginning with Moses and all the Prophets*” Jesus “*interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things*

## Post Confession Classes - The Church – Magnificent or Confusing?

Lecture 2 of Series - Rev. Clarence Bouwman – Presented - Oct. 10, 2012 - Smithville Ont.

---

*concerning himself*” (Luke 24:27). The faith of the Old Testament is fundamentally identical to the faith of the New Testament. The one, holy, catholic church, spanning as it does not just the continents but also the generations, is apostolic, embracing the gospel of redemption embryonically once revealed in Paradise (Genesis 3:15) and later further detailed in the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law, then reinforced by the prophets and eventually fulfilled in Jesus Christ Himself. This is the one message of salvation proclaimed in the church the Lord gathers, the one message believers of any tribe and language and culture gratefully embrace.

No, this does not mean that all believers have identical insights and emphases on every point of doctrine. Church members treasure the confessions the churches have, and so repeat after God in one’s own words what God has revealed in Scripture. Where those confessions agree with one another, they (and the members who embrace them) certainly display something of the unity of the church. But the fact is that confessions do not all agree on every point of doctrine. Here we’re confronted with the brokenness and finitude of the human race, be it in its inability to understand what God has revealed, or in its unwillingness to grasp its height or depth, or be it simply one’s own stubbornness in insisting on one’s own interpretation. If even an apostle of such stature as Paul could not overcome his brokenness (see Romans 7:14-25), how much less will we – and how much patience do we consequently need with one another. As Paul writes in another place, “*Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you*” (Philippians 3:15). Recall the imagery mentioned earlier: the church is a body that needs to grow. That takes time. Meanwhile, the church stays busy with Scripture, every bending humbly over the Word of God in earnest study of His revelation, aware that the teaching of the apostles is vital to her identity.

### Encouraging!

What follows from the conviction that the church of the Lord God is one, holy, catholic and apostolic? I cannot begin to get my head around the wonderful work the triumphant Christ is doing today on Planet Earth. I see so many churches in my town, I see so much fragmentation amongst these churches, I notice doctrines the same and doctrines at variance with each other. I detect around the world similarities with what I’m accustomed to in my home congregation, and I detect also so many differences in church cultures. It all looks so muddled, so confusing, so riddled with sin....

But it is the will of the Lord that I lift my gaze above the brokenness I see and *embrace in faith* the revelation of Scripture that the ascended Christ remains at work anywhere on Planet Earth, and always He works at a level above and beyond my ability to detect or to comprehend. He has *revealed* that He gathers *one* church, *holy* by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, *catholic* because Christ is exalted as King over the entire world and over every generation, and *apostolic* in that the church is rooted in the doctrine the disciples preached. I don’t see the church this way with the eye of the body, but I *believe* what my Lord has disclosed. I’m well aware that ‘my’ church is by no means the limit of Christ’s work on earth, and so I dare to look far beyond ‘my’ church in an attempt to see more of what my exalted Savior is doing on Planet Earth. With rejoicing I delight at what the Lord has done and continues to do for me and many others; He gathers for Himself the people the Father has given to Him, a people He has washed of their sins through His precious blood, a people He has sanctified through the Spirit He poured out. It’s exciting to confess, and so encouraging too: *I*, even *I*, have a place in this one, holy, catholic and apostolic church the Savior is working on. Yes, exciting! And humbling, for the brokenness my eye sees is not the measure of reality.

## Obligation

Amongst the most humbling and amazing aspects of how God has ordered the world He created is the fact that He wants people to *work along with Him* in His work. When God created the human race on the sixth day of Creation, He determined that human beings should “*have dominion over*” all that God had made (Genesis 1:26,28). In God’s wide world not a sparrow falls to the ground (Matthew 10:29), not a lion can roar (Amos 3:4), not a king can rule (Isaiah 10:5), and not a brother can be abused (Genesis 45:5) unless the Lord’s hand is involved. Yet despite His total sovereignty over all that happens, the Lord has given to the human race *full responsibility* for what one says and does. The interplay between God’s total sovereignty and our complete responsibility is far beyond any man’s ability to understand – and that is OK for it simply points up the greatness of the God we have, and so gives reason to worship Him.

This sovereign God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, gathers a church amongst people on Planet Earth. It is our obligation, then, to *work along with Him* in His church gathering work.

The point is important. Our current North American culture prizes *individualism*, where one sets one’s own agenda and does what one feels like doing. The result in turn is a good measure of *isolationism*, where people become islands to themselves, and interact with others only to the degree that I need the other. The Lord’s instruction is so very different. We’re not here for ourselves, but exist in order to serve – first of all God, and then invariably the neighbor. As one works along with the Lord in His church gathering work, the point is not what I can get out of it for myself, but the point is that I make it my business to walk in step with the Lord in His work, then work along with Him without regard to self or perceived personal benefit. He gathers a church, a flock, a body, builds a house, and the very nature of that church as an assembly, a flock, a body, a house, excludes individualism or the notion of being an island to oneself.

## How?

What does my obligation to work-along-with-Christ look like in practice? The Lord deals with people as responsible agents. He establishes a covenant with sinners, lays His claim of love upon them with the promise “*to be God to you*” (Genesis 17:7). That promise to “*be God to you*” involves His being your Father so that He supplies for all you need and works all things for your good; it involves the Son laying down His life for sinners to wash away their sins and make you righteous before God; and it involves the Holy Spirit renewing the sinner so that you embrace the promises of God as true and therefore live a life of thankful obedience. But these promises, given as they are to responsible beings, require a response. The response God wants is not that you (deliberately) ignore these promises, nor is it that you consider these promises a hoax; instead, the response God wants is that you accept them as real and true. Such a response is known as *faith*. It pleases God to give to those who believe the gracious gift of forgiveness of sins and life eternal. “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36), and “*The righteous shall live by faith*” (Romans 1:17), and “*Without faith it is impossible to please him*” (Hebrews 11:6). It is the duty of one and all to *believe* in the Lord Jesus Christ. Fundamental to being ‘church’ is not the presence of office bearers, or even the presence of a Bible, but is the presence of faith.

Sinners, though, become believers not by eating cabbage or sitting under a heat lamp; people by nature dead in sin become believers by the Holy Spirit working in their hearts through the Word. “*Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Romans 10:14). The hearing the apostle speaks about is, we realize, not a passive hearing – as one subconsciously hears the song of the radio as one is shopping. The hearing

## Post Confession Classes - The Church – Magnificent or Confusing?

Lecture 2 of Series - Rev. Clarence Bouwman – Presented - Oct.10, 2012 - Smithville Ont.

---

the apostle speaks of involves work, concentration. On an earlier page we'd spoken of how the Lord Jesus Christ sent Paul to preach the gospel in specific towns where there were elect people the Father had given to the Son. In step with that instruction is the mandate to preachers of subsequent generations to continue to "*preach the word...; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching*" (2 Timothy 4:2). But that word that's preached needs to be received by the hearer – and that can indeed be by hard work, involving much self-denial. That hard work includes a number of aspects vital to what the church is.

### Where?

The Lord has entrusted the preaching of the gospel of redemption not to the government or to entrepreneurs or to the media, but to the church. That reality implies that the person interested in faith –or interested in the strengthening of his faith– needs to assemble with the people of God. Or, as we say it in our language, he needs to 'go to church'.

At Mt Sinai the Lord God gave His people-by-covenant this instruction, "*Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation*" (Leviticus 23:3). The phrase "*a holy convocation*" describes the summoning together of the people to a "*holy*" meeting. On each Sabbath day the Israelites around Mt Sinai were called from their tents to meet not on some soccer field for a relaxing game together, but were called from their tents to a "*holy*" meeting – and that invariably refers to the one around the tabernacle. There the altar with its sacrifices portrayed how sinners could live in the presence of God. More, at the tabernacle the priests taught "*the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses*" (Leviticus 10:11). It was their duty, then, to proclaim the message of the tabernacle, to set forth to the people the reality of their depravity and how they deserved to die on account of sin, to proclaim too the good news of how the lamb on the altar died in their place to atone for sin and give life to the undeserving. It was the will of God that the gospel of grace was proclaimed to His people Sabbath by Sabbath, so that in turn His people might be strengthened in faith and so be equipped for the challenges of daily living in a fallen world. In keeping with that Old Testament picture of staying busy with the word, the believers after Pentecost "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship*" (Acts 2:42). The Greek of that verse requires us to see their *devoting* not as a once-off thing, but as an ongoing activity. In the same vein the Hebrews were told not to neglect "*to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*" (Hebrews 10:25). Here is the responsibility of the child of God: he is to work along with the Lord in the sense that he ensure that he assemble with God's people Sunday by Sunday and so expose himself to the means the Lord is pleased to use to work and strengthen faith. Too much is at stake to fail to obey this command. The apostle told the Hebrews not to fail to meet together even though there were approaching the point where they might need to pay for their faith with their lives – persecution (Hebrews 12:4). Though our culture encourages individualism and being an island to oneself, the Lord speaks so very differently.

### How?

Yet meeting together means so much more than simply getting oneself physically present in an assembly of the saints. God's intent when He instructed the priests of the Old Testament to "*teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses*" (Leviticus 10:11) was also that the people should submit to that instruction. They were to place themselves under the authority of the Word of God as it came to them through the teachers God in wisdom gave them. We realize that this required a particular mindset on the people's part, whereby they were willing to be instructed, willing to be corrected, and willing to be comforted. That necessarily included not just a willingness to listen to the

## Post Confession Classes - The Church – Magnificent or Confusing?

Lecture 2 of Series - Rev. Clarence Bouwman – Presented - Oct.10, 2012 - Smithville Ont.

---

general truths of God's word, but included specifically the willingness to accept what that word said to each Israelite in the specific circumstances he was in at any given moment.

Fully in line with that Old Testament thought was the practice of the New Testament apostle as he described his work to the elders of Ephesus. In his farewell address to them Paul reminded them that he "*did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house*" (Acts 20:20). Each Christian should submit to that word, and so Paul brought the significance of that word to bear on each believer. Part and parcel, then, of Scripture's instruction to "*meet together*" (Hebrews 10:25) is the need to submit to the authority of the Word as it comes to you in that assembly of the believers. Instead of challenging the preaching or tuning out from the preaching, you bend yourself under its authority. Instead of despising the office bearers, you accept them in what they say in the preaching and in their visits to your home. More on this in a later chapter.

The reason one is to submit to the instruction of the church is that one needs faith to "*draw near to God*" (Hebrews 11:6). The Holy Spirit works faith through the preaching. To resist the preaching simply hinders the work of the Spirit. Inasmuch as we are to work along with God in His church-gathering work, it is imperative that we submit to the preaching. If God has made salvation available to the interested in church (as opposed to in Walmart or Starbucks), it follows that we join that assembly of saints Sunday by Sunday. Staying home, withdrawing from church, using the Sunday for other purposes, is simply contrary to God's revealed will. If one believes God's word about the church, one needs to follow through with the repeated *act* of joining the church week after week and submitting to its instruction and discipline.

To be clear: this does not mean that Jesus Christ through His Spirit is not able to bring you to faith without the preaching in church. As Lord of lords, He is most certainly able to do that. But I'm speaking now of our responsibility, and Scripture is clear on what the Lord wants us to do to on the question of becoming a believer and being strengthened in faith. To reject that responsibility is to transgress against God's design that we work along with God. There can be no blessing on that. See further the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment.

### Not just locally

As a responsible person, I am obliged before God to walk in step with the Lord in His church gathering work. So, to use the analogy of the ocean again, I need to join the Lord's 'ocean' as it appears at my 'shore', that is, in my town.

At the same time 'my' church (made up as it is of responsible people) has its own collective responsibility. Since the Lord gathers *one, holy, catholic and apostolic* church, 'my' congregation is obliged to do more than confess this reality in words; 'my' church is also to give this confession concrete expression in deeds. One does that by avoiding isolation, and instead establishing bonds of love and cooperation with other 'shores' of the Lord's ocean.

The people of Israel gathered at Mt Sinai were obviously one people. They worshipped at one tabernacle in their midst, travelled together as one people through the desert (see Numbers 2), and as one people attacked and overcame the Promised Land (see Numbers 21:24,35; Joshua 10:29; etc). As they settled in their tribal allotments, however, the temptation was certainly there to ignore their sister tribes and become islands to themselves. That is why it is striking to read how in the days of Deborah the various tribes of Israel interacted with each other. Deborah functioned as judge in Israel from her base "*in the hill country of Ephraim*" (Judges 4:5) – a location just south of the middle of the country. To defend the land from the oppression of "*Jabin king of the Canaan, who reigned in Hazor*" (Judges 4:2) –and Hazor is well to the north of Israel– she called upon "*Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-Naphtali*" (4:6), a tribe located approximately half way between



## Post Confession Classes - The Church – Magnificent or Confusing?

Lecture 2 of Series - Rev. Clarence Bouwman – Presented - Oct.10, 2012 - Smithville Ont.

---

Deborah's base and Jabin's headquarters. Barak responds to Deborah's summons, and assembled "10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun" (the tribe right beside Naphtali) at "Mt Tabor" (a location on the border of Naphtali and Zebulun) to fight Jabin's forces.

What's instructive, now, is how Deborah after the battle described the involvement of the other tribes. The people of Ephraim marched out to fight along those of Naphtali and Zebulun, as did those from Benjamin much to the south and from Manasseh on yonder side of the Jordan. From Issachar up north next to Zebulun men came too to help in the battle (see Judges 5:14,15).

But notice this. In her song, Deborah also lists the tribes who did not join the battle, and in so doing she publicly rebukes these tribes. Reuben in the far southeast considered coming, but opted not to (5:15,16). Gad chose to stay at home, as did Dan and Asher (5:17). We're not told why they didn't send men to help deliver their brethren, but the lesson of the rebuke is clear: the Lord did not want His people to be isolated from each other, each minding their own business without regard for the others' wellbeing; each was instead to stand beside and support the other. Each is, by God's ordinance, the "brother's keeper" (Genesis 4:9). Hence there is this instruction to Israel, "If you hear in one of your cities, which the LORD your God is giving you to dwell in, that certain worthless fellows have gone out among you and have drawn away the inhabitants of their city, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods,' which you have not known, then you shall inquire and make search and ask diligently," and if the report were true God required specific response (Deuteronomy 13:12-15). Because they were one people sharing one faith in service to one God, they were to be one people standing beside and supporting each other in all the cares and questions of life.

Given this Old Testament instruction, it is not at all surprising to notice in the New Testament so many indications of interest in and care for far-flung churches. When word came to Jerusalem that in Antioch the gospel was being preached to Gentiles and that many had "turned to the Lord ..., they sent Barnabas to Antioch" (Acts 11:21,22) in order to express their interest and support for this delightful development. When a famine made things difficult for "the brothers living in Judea," disciples from Antioch organized to "send relief" (Acts 11:29). The saints from "Macedonia and Achaia" were "pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem" (Romans 15:26; cf 2 Corinthians 8:1-4). This mutual care for one another prompted Paul to commend the Thessalonians for the "brotherly love" they were showing "to all the brothers throughout Macedonia," but at the same time urged them "to do this more and more" (1 Thessalonians 4:9,10). As the Lord Jesus Christ emptied Himself for the benefit of peoples around the world (and so now gathers a catholic church), so the child of God needs to empty himself for the benefit of brethren far off – and so give expression to his belief that Christ's church-gathering work is catholic.

There is another reason why the local church may not remain an island to itself, isolated from the Lord's work elsewhere. Solomon long ago told his people that "in an abundance of counselors there is safety" and "without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed" (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22). There was so much the church of Corinth could learn from elsewhere; to help resolve a local issue Paul asked, "Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?" (1 Corinthians 14:36). In the church of Antioch division arose on the question of whether the Gentiles who came to faith ought to be circumcised. Instead of seeking to resolve the issue on their own, they sent a delegation to the church in Jerusalem for input (Acts 15:1,2). In the same vein, as believers moved to other locations in the world, their new church readily received the initial church's testimony about them. "When [Apollos] wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him" (Acts 18:27; cf Romans 16:1,2). In fact,

## Post Confession Classes - The Church – Magnificent or Confusing?

Lecture 2 of Series - Rev. Clarence Bouwman – Presented - Oct.10, 2012 - Smithville Ont.

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several of the apostle's letters end with words of greetings from and to particular persons, including also greetings from churches to churches. "*All the churches of Christ greet you,*" Paul writes to the saints of Rome (Romans 16:16). "*The churches of Asia send you greetings,*" Paul says to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:19).

This is the reason why the churches of the early New Testament period met together from time to time in councils or synods – and so together fought heresies and adopted creeds and in general supported and encouraged each other in the struggles of faith. This is the reason why churches after the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century have formed federations, with agreements to meet together in classes and synods, and commitments to assist each other in whatever way necessary and possible.<sup>1</sup>

As the world has shrunk and continues to shrink, it is imperative that the people of God keep an eye open to see Christ's bigger work outside our habitual area of observation. His work is not limited to 'my' church, or to 'my' federation of churches. Those whom the Father has given to Him come from any tribe or town, and as the generations come and go the place and culture where God's chosen live may also change and move. It is for the child of God to walk in step with where Christ Jesus is walking – and He goes where the Father's elect are. So we may not be surprised at what we might see as changes-of-direction on the Savior's part. In a given generation He may have very few people in a given city or country, and in the next generation have many the Father has given Him in that city or country. Similarly, in a given generation He may have many people in 'my' town, and in a next generation very few. We are not asked whether we like it that way, but we are asked to walk in step with the Savior wherever He is busy. So we need to be flexible, ready to see what He is doing and make the changes necessary to keep walking in step with Him – and do so communally.

This is what makes life on earth so exciting! My Savior is busy today, in my town and in my life – what privilege! Tomorrow He may be busy elsewhere too, and I have the privilege to watch where He goes and travel along with Him as He gathers together all those for whom He died. One day soon –I know not when– His work will be complete and the universal church of the Lord assembled as one in the New Jerusalem. How we'll marvel to see on that day the countless of the redeemed, and the languages, cultures, colors and habits that comprise the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Jesus Christ.

Come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>1</sup> See further on this point my book on the Church Order, *Spiritual Order for the Church*.