

“The Yoke of Jesus Christ”

An Exposition of Article Twenty-Eight of the Belgic Confession

Article 28: The Obligations of Church Members

We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it,¹ no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition. But all people are obliged to join and unite with it,² keeping the unity of the church by submitting to its instruction and discipline,³ by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ,⁴ and by serving to build up one another,⁵ according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body.⁶

And to preserve this unity more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to God’s Word, to separate themselves from those who do not belong to the church,⁷ in order to join this assembly wherever God has established it,⁸ even if civil authorities and royal decrees forbid and death and physical punishment result.⁹

And so, all who withdraw from the church or do not join it act contrary to God’s ordinance.

¹ Mt 16:18-19; Acts 2:47; Gal 4:26; Eph 5:25-27; Heb 2:11-12, 12:23 ² 2 Chron 30:8; Jn 17:21; Col 3:15 ³ Heb 13:17 ⁴ Mt 11:28-30 ⁵ Eph 4:12 ⁶ 1 Cor 12:7, 27; Eph 4:16 ⁷ Num 16:23-26; Is 52:11-12; Acts 2:40; Rom 16:17; Rev 18:4 ⁸ Ps 122:1; Is 2:3; Heb 10:25 ⁹ Acts 4:19-20

Church membership is not an option for those who profess faith in Christ. Since the church is the mystical body of Jesus Christ, all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ are obligated to join a local congregation of like-minded believers. But membership in such a local congregation of like-minded believers entails a number of privileges and responsibilities. And these privileges and responsibilities are now set forth for us beginning in Article Twenty-Eight of the Belgic Confession.

We are in that section of our confession (Articles Twenty-Seven through Thirty-Two) dealing with the doctrine of the church. Article Twenty-Seven of our confession defines the church as “a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.” This church has existed from the beginning of redemptive history, first in the form of the family, then throughout the patriarchal period through the extended family (clan) and, then, finally, the church was manifest in and through the nation of Israel. Just as there has always been one gospel and one covenant of grace, so too, there has always been one people of God manifest in different ways throughout the course of redemptive history—Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New.

That being said, there is a significant redemptive-historical shift during the New Testament era from what had been a narrow focus upon the Jews and national Israel in the Old Testament to a universalizing of the promise which now extends to the Gentile nations throughout the earth. According to Paul, now that the fulness of time has come with the birth of Jesus (cf. Galatians 4:4-6), believing Gentiles are

presently being grafted into the righteous root (who is Christ) from which national Israel has been removed until immediately before the end of the age (cf. Ephesians 2:11-22; Romans 11:17 ff). This explains why the writers of the New Testament often use messianic prophecy to prove to unbelieving Jews that Jesus Christ is the true Israel (the obedient son), and that his mystical body is also the true temple of the Lord, which is now indwelt by the Holy Spirit.¹

While many people contend that the church began at Pentecost, it is better to think of Pentecost as the dawn of the age of the Spirit when the people of God (now called the church) are indwelt by the Holy Spirit as the characteristic of the messianic age, whereas before the day of Pentecost, such an indwelling was for a limited duration and for specific purposes. The church in the New Testament is described as the body of Christ, conveying the idea that we are united to Jesus Christ our living head and that we derive our life and vitality from him. The church is also depicted as a spiritual temple composed of living stones (its members), built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ and his gospel, indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit.

This is why our confession speaks of the church of Jesus Christ as a “holy congregation.” Our sins have been forgiven through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, our great high priest, and we are clothed in the perfect righteousness of our savior. We are holy. Given the fact that all true believers in Jesus Christ are part of his body (the invisible church) all believers are therefore obligated to join a local congregation of fellow believers who profess the same faith (the visible church).

This is why the unity of the local church is based upon a common confession of faith (i.e. the same doctrine), not personal preferences, race, culture, or socio-economic factors. The church is “catholic” or universal. The true church is not limited to any single congregation or denomination but is found wherever the gospel is rightly preached, the sacraments are administered according to the word of God, and where discipline (not tyranny) is exercised over the life and doctrine of its members. Our confession speaks of this “catholicity” of the church as follows: “And this holy church is preserved by God against the rage of the whole world, even though for a time it may appear very small in the eyes of men—as though it were snuffed out.” We are part of something much bigger than ourselves and the federation of the United Reformed Churches of North America. We are part of the universal body of Christ and one in heart and will with all of those millions of Reformed Christians who confess the same faith as do we.

As we now consider article Twenty-Eight and the obligations of the members of the visible church, we need to carefully consider the fact that these articles on the church were written in a period of time much different than our own. As we have seen, Guido De Bres composed these articles in direct response to the Roman church shortly after the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent had been promulgated as a direct response to Protestantism. Given the marriage between church and state typical of late-medieval Europe (Christendom, the actions taken by the Holy Roman Empire against Protestants were almost always done in concert with the church. If the Roman church regarded Protestantism as a threat to the well-being of the church, then the empire supplied the military might to intercede.

It was during this time that Spanish authorities under the command of Haspburg King, Philip II, and his prime henchman, the Duke of Alva, put so many Reformed Christians to death that church historian Philip Schaff can lament: “the number of martyrs exceeds that of any other Protestant church during the

¹ See [A Case for Amillennialism](#), 43-80.

sixteenth century, and perhaps that of the whole primitive church under the Roman empire.”² This explains De Bres’ pointed efforts to remind Christians of the necessity of joining a local church even though to do so might put one in direct conflict with the governing authorities.

De Bres must not only summarize the biblical teaching regarding the church and then refute the erroneous view that the Roman Church is the body of Christ with whom all Christians must unite if they are to be saved,³ he must also make the case that Spanish authorities must not confuse the Reformed churches with the Anabaptists, like those who took over the city of Münster and scandalized Protestantism for generations to come. In one sense, the articles in our confession dealing with the church are in many ways a plea to Philip II for toleration since at least 10% of the Dutch population had Reformed sympathies during this time.⁴ Given the horrific persecutions that Reformed Christians faced throughout this entire period, many people were undoubtedly afraid to express these sympathies publicly, since joining a church meant they might face the sword from the likes of Philip II and the Duke of Avila.⁵ De Bres must convince such people that their faith in Christ must come to public expression. There is no such thing as a secret Christian, even in times of persecution.

Therefore, we must keep this historical situation in mind as we work our way through these articles. Our situation is completely different. We live in a land of peace and relative religious liberty. Very likely, we will not be arrested by government officials acting on orders of the Roman Catholic church and put to death for daring to celebrate the Lord’s Supper without the Roman church’s blessing—as was the author of our confession. We must keep all this in mind, if we are to make sense of some of the surprisingly strong language in these articles.

In order to set forth the biblical teaching regarding the obligations of church members, our confession makes three main points. The first point reminds Christians (even under times of great persecution such as the Reformed churches in Holland were facing) of the necessity of joining the church. The second point describes our conduct as members of the church, before finally discussing “the office” (although our confession uses the term “duty”) of believers.

With this in mind, we now work our way through the first part of Article Twenty-Eight of our confession, which deals with the necessity of uniting with a local congregation. Our confession puts the necessity of church membership this way, “We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it,¹ no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition.” Remember, these words were written to people who truly faced death if they publicly identified with a Reformed congregation.

That being said, De Bres’ point here is not original to him. In his commentary on Isaiah, John Calvin stated that “God chiefly aims at gathering us into one body, that we may have in it a testimony of our adoption, and may acknowledge him to be a father, and may be nourished in the womb of the Church as our mother.” This, of course, echoes the famous words of the church father, Cyprian, who stated, “No

² Schaff, Creeds of Christendom, I.503.

³ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 211.

⁴ Osterhaven, Our Confession of Faith, “Preface.”

⁵ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 212.

one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother.”⁶ Rome took statements from church fathers like Cyprian as a basis for the oft-repeated claim that “outside the [Roman] church there is no salvation.”⁷ But Cyprian, like Calvin and De Bres after him did not mean that the church dispenses grace and therefore, dispenses salvation, as Rome argues. Cyprian’s words are drawn from Galatians 4:26 in which Paul states that the heavenly Jerusalem is our mother.

Clearly, De Bres meant by the phrase there is “no salvation outside the church” that the church is that place where the gospel is preached and where the sacraments are administered according to the word of God. The church as an institution does not dispense either grace or salvation. We are not saved through our connection to the church. Rather, confessional Protestants believe that saving grace is to be found wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the public assembly of those united in mind and heart around that gospel. But if the gospel isn’t proclaimed in such an assembly, it is not a true church regardless of the denomination to which it belongs—but that is a subject we take up in the next article when we come to the marks of the church.

Because the visible church (which is where the word is preached and the sacraments are administered) is where the invisible church (the elect) takes form when we assemble for public worship, no one can profess faith in Jesus Christ and then withdraw from the church for reasons other than those related to the marks of the church. There is no permission given us in the Bible to be content to be by ourselves and not under authority of creeds and confessions (in so far as these summarize Scripture), the authority of ministers of word and sacrament (who exercise the keys of the kingdom) and the authority of the local consistories (the elders who rule the church in the name of Christ). De Bres is clearly speaking of those who are afraid of being persecuted so that they refuse to join, choosing instead to keep their commitment to Protestantism secret. We can surely understand why people would need such an exhortation under those circumstances. But we cannot accept such reluctance and apathy toward the church today.

In our context, this certainly applies to people who do not like to make a commitment to certain doctrines (Scripture warns us about people who are always learning but who never come to a knowledge of the truth—2 Timothy 3:7), or to people who have personal agendas and don’t want to submit to those leaders whom God has raised up and placed over them for the care of their souls, or to people who are just plain indifferent about the doctrine of the church (and don’t really care what Scripture says about the church), or even to people who may not like some particular aspect of the church (the pastor, the people, the music, the programs or lack thereof, the carpeting) not directly connected to the marks of the church (word, sacraments and discipline).

Such things may truly matter if there happens to be a community where there are several true churches. If you happen to live where there are a number of true churches to choose from, then other factors may indeed come into play as to which one you attend. But there is no biblical justification whatsoever for people to withdraw from the church for reasons other than those related to the marks of the church. As De Bres puts it, “But all people are obliged to join and unite with it.” This applies both in times of persecution and especially in situations such as ours when freedom abounds.

The biblical data regarding the necessity of church membership is crystal clear. We have already noted

⁶ St. Cyprian, *De unit.* 6: PL 4, 519

⁷ See, for example, the “systematic index” in Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 12-13.

that there is no category whatsoever in the New Testament for people who profess faith in Christ but who are not also members of the local church. We have seen that Paul repeatedly speaks of the church as the body of Jesus Christ (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 10-11; Colossians 3:15), as well as identifying the church as the temple of the living God (Ephesians 2:11-22). Peter speaks of the members of Christ's church as living stones who together form the new temple of the Lord (1 Peter 2:5).

Jesus spoke of building the church as the very essence of his messianic mission. In Matthew 16:18-19, our Lord declares, *"I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

It is quite illustrative that after the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost—in fulfillment of Jesus' promise to build his church, beginning in v. 41 (of Acts 2) Luke writes:

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

In others words, all those upon whom God poured his spirit became members of the first Jerusalem church.

In this same way, in Ephesians 5:25-27, Paul speaks of Christ's loving care for his church.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

In Hebrews 2:11-12, the author also speaks of the church as a family, a holy congregation of brethren who sing God's praises.

Given the nature of the local church as the public assembly of all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, our confession is absolutely correct to assert that everyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ is obligated to join a local church of like-minded believers. While there are times of transition, church membership is not optional.

Next, our confession speaks of the obligations assumed by those who unite with a local church.

Our confession sets forth these obligations as follows: "keeping the unity of the church by submitting to its instruction and discipline, by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and by serving to build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body." It is interesting that after making the case for the necessity of membership in the church, our

confession immediately moves on to describe a series of obligations on the part of church members beginning with the importance of maintaining the unity of the church, since each member of the church is a member of Christ's body. Not only is Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church filled with references to the body of Christ and the importance of maintaining the unity of that body, but the importance of this unity can be seen in our Lord's high priestly prayer as found in John 17:21: may "*all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.*"

According to our confession, we demonstrate this unity through the following actions. First, we submit to the teaching office of the church—that is, we embrace whole-heartedly that doctrine contained in the ecumenical creeds (*Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian Creed*) and in the Three Forms of Unity. Because the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Belgic Confession* and the *Canons of Dort* very effectively summarize the central teaching of the word of God, we are to submit to the teaching (doctrine) of the church in so far as the doctrines contained within these documents faithfully summarize the teaching of Scripture.

But in direct connection to our submission to the teaching of the church, we must also submit to the discipline of the church, a topic we will take up in some detail in Article Thirty-Two in our series on the confession. Since discipline is mentioned here, let us not forget what the author of Hebrews has to say in this regard: "*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you*" (Hebrews 13:17). The nature of the authority of those who rule the church and the way it should be exercised in the name of the Lord, is defined in Articles Thirty and Thirty-One.

While the very thought of submitting to the church and its leaders rankles many of us—especially since we are independent minded Americans—we must carefully consider the reason why we are to do submit to such authority. According to Matthew 11:28-30, it is to our great benefit to do so. Jesus himself declares that submission to him is not a burden but a joy, "*come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*"

Jesus asks us to submit to him because in doing so we will find rest for our souls, not abuse nor tyranny. This is why it is so sad when churches use their authority to shepherd souls, as an excuse to coerce, badger or bully those whom Christ entrusts to their care. But no matter how badly we may burden people, Christ's yoke is easy. The church should always be a place where we find rest and where our burdens are relieved, not increased. This is why we submit to the yoke of Jesus and learn from him—for he is gentle and he will give us rest.

Next, our confession mentions the importance of exercising those gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit in the context of the local church. These spiritual gifts are given for the greater good of the church and enable us to serve others in the name of Christ. According to our confession, we submit to the yoke of Jesus Christ and thereby "serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body." According to Paul these gifts are given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). These gifts of the Spirit are enumerated by Paul in Romans 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 12:7, these gifts are given for the common good. The purpose of the gifts of the Spirit is not to create "super saints" who dazzle us with their spiritual greatness, but to build up and strengthen the church for the common good and for the cause of Jesus Christ. The inconsistency of being given such spiritual gifts for the purpose of the edification of the church and for the common good, and then withdrawing from the church should be self-evident.

Finally our confession takes up the subject of the general office of all believers.

According to our confession to observe this [unity and the building up of the church] more effectively, “and to preserve this unity more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to God’s Word, to separate themselves from those who do not belong to the church, in order to join this assembly wherever God has established it, even if civil authorities and royal decrees forbid and death and physical punishment result. And so, all who withdraw from the church or do not join it act contrary to God’s ordinance.” The strong language in this article always causes a bit of consternation when we first encounter it, although it makes perfect sense when we look at the situation which existed at the time our confession was written.

As I have already noted, the phrase “duty of believers” can also be translated “office” of believers and refers to a deputized authority for service because we all share in the authority of Christ in his three-fold office of prophet, priest and king. It is through these offices which come from our union with Christ that we are to fight against the world, the flesh and the devil. But since we have been deputized by Christ to represent him before the world, we assume certain “duties” which come with being a Christian believer.⁸

The first of these duties mentioned by the confession is the two-fold act of withdrawing from those who do not belong to the church and then uniting with a local church which possesses the marks of a true church. Since our confession was written in a time of horrible persecution, the language of separating from those outside the church must be understood in that light—many people in de Bres’ time did not want to openly break with the Roman church and then suffer the consequences of joining a Reformed congregation. We can just imagine someone who was part of a Roman Catholic guild or trade union, secretly attending Protestant worship, afraid to make such a commitment known. Such people called themselves “secret believers” and tried to avoid suffering for the gospel.⁹

De Bres’ point is that there can be no such thing as a secret believer. If you are in Christ, then you may be called to suffer for his name’s sake. Even if the state forbids you from worshiping according to God’s word, and threatens you with death or imprisonment, you are still obligated to publicly identify with Christ’s church. In this instance, the state, which Paul calls a minister of God in Romans 13, is now functioning as the Satanically-inspired beast of the Book of Revelation. It has been said of the Calvinists of this period that they feared no man because they feared God. Would that be said of us.

Our confession is not instructing us to give up seeing all our non-Christian friends and to ignore or abandon our non-Christian family members. But the confession is reminding us of the huge anti-thesis between Christians and non-Christians which can be seen throughout Scripture. This antithesis extends to our most fundamental values, how we see ourselves and the world around us, how we live life and to the choices we make. As we see in Numbers 16:23-35, Moses was to warn the assembly of Israel to get away from those evil men in their midst who were about to come under the judgment of God. To even be in physical proximity to such men was to risk being consumed when the ground swallowed them up. Israel was repeatedly warned not to tolerate such wickedness in her midst. The same warning is given to the church whose leaders are commanded to excommunicate those who teach falsely or who claim to be Christ’s, but live like pagans.

⁸ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 215.

⁹ De Jong, The Church’s Witness to the World, II.253.

If you know the Old Testament at all, you know that Israel was under the constant temptation to worship the “gods” of her neighbors so as to keep the peace and enjoy economic gain. Israel’s children were repeatedly tempted to marry pagans who worshiped other “gods.” This was Satan’s primary mode of attack upon the covenant community. As Israel’s own religious leaders became increasingly pagan in their thinking and doing, God’s judgment came down upon the nation in the form of the Babylonian captivity and the entire nation was removed from the land of promise.

So while this article is not exhorting us to give up all contact with non-Christians (in fact, Paul tells us that if we did so, we’d have to leave the world, cf. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13), we are being warned that as Christians there are certain relationships in which cannot engage with non-Christians. Christians are expressly forbidden from marrying non-Christians, therefore dating non-Christians and getting involved with someone with non-Christian ways of thinking and doing involves the serious risk of falling in love and marrying someone who hates the gospel. Do not go there! Since Christians are to live lives of gratitude in obedience to God’s commandments, to form partnerships, business relationships or other alliances with those who do not embrace a biblical ethic is to risk falling into sin and bringing shame to gospel. The New Testament is filled with warnings against these kinds of relationships with pagans. While we must live in a world filled with pagans, we cannot make peace with paganism.

The point our confession is making is simply this—we cannot serve two masters. If we are truly in Christ, then you must join a local assembly of like-minded believers while at the same time be perfectly clear about the danger of undue involvement with those outside the church, many of whom do not have our best interests at heart. There are people outside the church who will do everything in their power to steal our minds, hearts and innocence. Be on your guard and don’t be naive about this. The Antithesis between Christianity and paganism is great. And paganism can be very seductive.

In light of these solemn warnings, our confession concludes by reaffirming one primary point, “all therefore who draw away from the church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.” It is Jesus himself who calls his people to gather together to publicly confess him as Lord. It is Jesus who establishes his church for the benefit of his people, who fills that church with his Spirit, and who promises that here, among his people, we will find rest for our weary souls, along with strength to fight the battle against those who seek to do us ill. It is the Lord of the church himself who says to us, “*come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*”