

BC art. 27; Rev. 5:1-10; Eph. 4:1-16; One Church? I. The Diversity of the Church II. The Unity of the Church

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, how many churches are there? This evening we will confess the Apostles Creed in which we confess a holy, catholic church. It is not that we believe in the church- we do not place our faith in this body- but rather we confess that there is a church of believers that are called together by Christ. Last week we considered how Jesus fulfilled the Law- and how He now makes his people into a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. Today we see that the universal church is this group of holy people that are being saved. In the Belgic Confession, we are moving on to the subject of the church. This week, we are looking at the identity of the universal church- while next week we will focus on responsibilities of these members. When we begin to look at the church, it is important to remember where, when and how this group of believers is gathered. In Eph. 5 we find that the church is called the bride of Christ. Now how many brides does Christ have? As we think about last week we ask- Does Jesus have one bride in the OT- the Jewish people- and a different bride in the NT- the church? Or is there one bride- made up of all believers- from the beginning of the world until its end? Today we will consider this theme: the Husband of the church gathers His people from the world. The church is the ekklesia- those called out of this world and gathered into one body- the church.

## **II. The Diversity of the Church**

In our first point, we are going to see the diversity and uniqueness found within this one body. It stands to reason that Christ must have a church- and this church will be made up of unique people. Since Jesus Christ is a King- and every King must have citizens- there must be citizens within Christ's Kingdom! But although we are all holy and one in Christ- as we will see in our second point- that does not mean that we are all exactly the same! As our BC art. states- the church is diverse in where it comes from and when it is called. To put this another way- who makes up the church? Who can be a member of this people of God? As our article says- this church is not bound, confined or limited to a certain place or persons- but is spread and dispersed over the whole world. Or as our passage says in Rev. 5:9 – a people have been ransomed from every tribe and language and people and nation. The church is called from all the corners

of this world. There is no man- so depraved- that God cannot change his heart and bring him into the kingdom. There is no place so remote, that God cannot send forth his workers to reap what is white for harvest! This is truly good news for us. As HC QA 54 puts it the church is the people of God who are gathered from the beginning of the world until its end from every nation. Although it is true that the church started with one family- Adam through Shem- and at the flood only 8 were saved. After this point, the church grew to include a whole clan- Abraham down to Jacob or Israel and his 12 sons- and on to the 12 tribes- and eventually after Pentecost- spread from Jerusalem to Judea to the ends of the world. There was a gradual expansion from the narrow to broad- so that now God's people are hearing the gospel in almost every corner of the globe. This is that great cloud of witnesses we find in Heb. 12. As Gal. 3:28 made clear- all who have put on Christ are now one- whoever believes in God's Son is now considered Abraham's offspring. There is no group that is excluded- slave and free, Jew and Gentile- we are all welcomed into this glorious Assembly of God's people. This is an important reminder for us in our context- although we can give thanks to God for the blessings we have been given in our rich heritage- we must remember that we are not a Dutch church- or a Canadian or American church- but first of all we are the church of our Lord Jesus Christ! We are members of His body- gathered together in this place. We belong to Christ and are saved by faith just as much as Paul was- David and Daniel- the thief on the cross- Augustine and Calvin. We have no more right to gospel than the saints in Iraq and Egypt. There is no country or group that has a unique claim- rather the church has a world wide- and age wide gathering. From the beginning of the world to the end- from every nation on this earth- the church is the called together assembly of God who are ransomed by the blood of the Lamb! Around our dinner table we often discuss the fact that we will see the men and woman of faith in glory one day! Including Abraham and Abigail- Samson and Samuel. But the diversity of the church not only covers diverse times and places, it also covers diverse people within the same time period and place! Eph. 4:2 exhorts us to bear with one another in love. Why would we need this calling to patience and humility if we were all exactly the same? No, the church is made up of diverse people from different backgrounds and with different gifts. Continuing in Eph 4:11 we find different offices and callings within this church. Not all have the

same abilities and not all are called to the same offices within the church! In fact, this diversity is for the good of the body as a whole. That is one of the points that Paul makes in I Cor. 12- the body consists of many members- without diverse members there would be no body. We need the many parts of the body to make the body whole. And again- back in Eph. 4:16- we find that only when the various part of the body are working together- working properly- only then will the body function well as a unity- growing up and built in love. The point is this- your unique gift set, ability and position is not only set about by a sovereign God- it is also planned and purposed for the good of this body as a whole! Our diversity adds to the beauty and strength of the church! You are needed in this church- and you need this body to minister to you as well. Conflict is nothing new within the church of Christ- in fact it is expected since we have different ideas and opinions. That is why we must strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace as v. 3 says. Although we will never agree on everything- we each should be eager to pursue unity as we use our unique gifts and positions for the building up of the whole.

## **II. The Unity of the Church**

Yet, although we are diverse and come from all different backgrounds, times and places- we are still the one bride of Christ- the one church of our Lord. Because there is only one way to the Father- the church by definition must be one. Since there is only one Shepherd, there will always be one flock- as John 10 says. Since we have one King- we will be one Kingdom. Gal. 3:26 says that you are all sons of God through faith! In fact, because we have a shared faith; we have more in common with a believer in China than our unbelieving next door neighbor! Let's consider this unity we have from Eph. 4. Follow the progress in v. 4 one body and one Spirit- we have unity of the Spirit. As a member of the true church, we have a shared spiritual deposit- the Holy Spirit dwells within our hearts- so together we share the Spirit! We are each united to Christ our head- v. 5 says- One Lord! We have a common Savior who shared blood covers all our sins. We live under a united dominion- our Lord Jesus! We are His bride and body- we share the same head and Lord as v. 15 states. Since we have one Savior- we as His body must be and are one. We have one hope- v. 4 says- we are united in what we desire and long for! We are each eagerly awaiting the appearing of our Lord- we have a shared desire to see our savior face! We also have a

shared faith- v. 5 says- we are united in the content and the person of our trust! We rely on the same mediator- and the gospel unites our core being- we all share this trust in Christ alone! We serve and worship one true God- v. 6 says- we are all God's children- adopted by grace! We share in this same heavenly Father- thus we are all part of the same family! So there is a unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit- we serve the same God! There is a unity of faith and hope- and thus a shared love for God and love for one another. But I skipped one aspect of this unity- found back in v. 5. We share one baptism- we are united in this sign and seal of the covenant! We, as God's people, share the common seal and mark of God's people! This is fitting to remember today- as we saw little Nathan receive the sign and seal a few moments ago! Being born within the household of faith, Nathan now shares the sign that all of God's people share. The mark of those who belong to Jesus Christ has been applied to Him as well! As Jesus said before He ascended, go out and make disciples of all nations- baptizing then in the name of God- Father Son and Holy Spirit- and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded. We are co-heirs with Christ- united in Christ- and fellow recipients of the sign that Christ commanded! By baptism, the members of Christ's church are identified and sealed for the rest of our lives. This one belongs to me- Jesus says. But how can we say that we are one with all true believers when there are so many different churches and denominations today? Our article answers by saying that we are joined- or united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit. Unity is something that comes from God- and the unity that the church universal has is their unity in their faith in this One God and Lord. We are united in our belief in the gospel truths- in our service of the One King! The OT believers are not a different bride- but rather they and we are all part of the one bride of Christ. Even in our world today- all true believers are part of this one, universal church. Although we may belong to different local churches, our citizenship in the Kingdom above is where true and lasting unity is found! In this life- because the local churches are populated by sinners- there will never be one, universal church denomination. Yes, our churches' distinctions are important- and that may mean that we cannot join together with other churches that do not believe as we do. However, what unites all true believers is their faith in this One Lord. Although our local churches may be distinct- the unity that we have in Christ with all true believers

means that we are part of this one, universal church. Church unity is not something that we can make; rather it is a gift of the Spirit as Eph. 4 said. Since there is but one Christ, faith and Spirit- all who partake of these are one! What unites us is greater than any difference we might have!

To conclude, the existence of the universal church testifies to Christ's glory, power and reign as King. The gathering of this universal church is possible because of His intercession- because there is a perfect High Priest there must be a holy people- a united kingdom of priests! Christ will have His people- the King will have His subjects. Together, the church expects their salvation in Christ- are washed in His blood and sanctified by His Spirit- this church is made up of a holy congregation of true believers. The local church is a visible manifestation of Christ's, one body. The church is not a human invention- it is the work of Christ in gathering His sheep. We rejoice in the unity we have with Christ- and with one another! And for those who trust in Christ by faith- you too are a part of His body- one holy, universal church!