

THE CATHOLICITY OF CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHURCH¹

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According to the ninth article of our undoubted Christian faith we confess the *universality* or *catholicity* of the one, holy Christian Church. The origin and initial significance of this term is completely unknown to us. We first encounter it in the letter of Ignatius to the church at Smyrna (chap. 8), in the Muratorian Canon, and in the letter from the church of Smyrna to that of Philomelius concerning the martyrdom of Polycarp.² Apparently at that point it already had a fixed and generally acknowledged meaning. It appears to have become current during the second half of the second century when it was necessary for the church to insist on its unity over against increasing numbers of heretics. The *textus receptus* of the Apostolic Symbol does not predate the end of the fifth century. In the version of the Creed which comes to us from Rome this specific designation of the church is absent. It is found, however, in the versions that come from Spain, Aquileia and Carthage. It is not unlikely that this designation of the church was initially incorporated into the Creed in the East and from there found its way into Western Creeds. However this may be, in the Apostolic Symbol, the catholicity of the church has become the confession of all Christendom.

As used by the church fathers, the word "catholicity" has three basic

1. Translated by John Bolt, from H. Bavinck, *De Katholiceit van Christendom en Kerk* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1888). This address was delivered at the Theological School, Kampen, on December 18, 1888. A new edition, introduced by G. Puchinger, was published by J. H. Kok (Kampen) in 1968. Many thanks to Professor Albert Wolters of Redeemer College, who carefully read the first draft of the translation and made numerous suggestions that improved the text.

2. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.15.

meanings. In the first place, they use it to refer to the church as a unified whole in contrast to the dispersed local congregations that make up the whole and are included in it. The local church can, however, legitimately call itself catholic because it attaches itself to the universal church. Secondly, the term expresses the unity of the church as inclusive of all believers from every nation, in all times and places. Catholic is thus in contrast with the nationally identified people of God — Israel. And finally, the church is sometimes referred to as catholic because it embraces the whole of human experience. It possesses perfectly all doctrines concerning either invisible and visible things that human beings need to know; it provides a cure for all kinds of sin, either of body or soul; it produces all virtues and good works, and partakes of all spiritual gifts.³

This catholicity of the church that is confessed by all Christians presupposes the catholicity of the Christian religion. It is based on the conviction that Christianity is a world religion that should govern all people and sanctify all creatures irrespective of geography, nationality, place, and time. In recent years there has been much talk about national and world religions. This division of religions into two classes — national and international — is beset with insurmountable difficulties and objections. In actuality there is no religion that can truly be called a world religion, and it is not likely that in the present dispensation one religion will in fact triumph over all others. Furthermore, in principle, there can be in the very nature of the case only one religion that is truly and fully universal and capable of permeating and sanctifying all others. Is there any other religion than the Christian that comes to mind here? It depends on our concept of this universalism of the Christian religion whether we become narrow or broad in our ecclesiology. How we relate grace to nature, re-creation (*herscheping*) to creation (*scheping*), deter-

3. Translator's note: This last dimension of catholicity is freely borrowed by Bavinck from Cyril of Jerusalem's "Catechetical Lectures" (XVIII, 23). The paragraph reads 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 sort 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 works or in spiritual graces of every description.

In *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, ed. William Telfer, The Library of Christian Classics, Volume IV (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), p. 186.

mines whether our ecclesiastical vision will be broad or narrow. The affirmation of the catholicity of the church and of the universalism of Christianity is of the greatest significance in our time, which is so rife with errors and schisms.

On this occasion,⁴ therefore, I propose to call to your attention my reflections on *The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church* and to consider in broad outline: (1) The teaching of Scripture on catholicity; (2) The church's understanding of catholicity in its history; and (3) The obligations catholicity places before us today.

I. SCRIPTURAL TEACHING ON CATHOLICITY

Our attention is unavoidably drawn to the fact that the five books of Moses, which begin with the grandeur of Creation, with a vision of the entire cosmos and the whole of humanity, conclude by focusing attention on a small and insignificant people and its minute concerns about holiness and cult. There seems to be an undeniable disproportionality between this sublime beginning and this narrowly focused conclusion. The foundation on which the law given to Israel is built is truly broad. The grand introduction thus leads us to expect something quite different. God creates the heavens and the earth in six days, sanctifies the seventh day and blesses humanity. This blessing is renewed to Noah and his family after their deliverance from the flood. In fact God makes a covenant with all of nature. However, from this point on, the circle within which God bestows his blessings becomes progressively smaller: Shem, Abram, Isaac, Jacob. It is a single, poor, and contemptible people that God finally elects unto inheritance. And he allows all the other nations to walk in their own ways. This broad foundation on which Israel's election rests does remind us, however, that her election cannot be the end goal. God's revelation, which becomes focused on Israel, has the nations in its ultimate purview. In Israel itself revelation dominates everything. A separation between the cult (*godsdiens*t) and the rest of life is altogether impossible. All dualism is eschewed in the unity of God's theocratic rule. The law of YHWH regulates everything even to the smallest minutiae. Not only the priests but also the kings; not only the cultic and the moral but also the civil and social and political dimensions of life are governed by the one law of God. Here we encounter an *inner catholicity*, a religion that encompasses the whole person in the wholeness of life.

4. Translator's note: see note 1, above.

In this way Israel's theocracy is a *by* of the coming kingdom of God that shall take up into itself all that is good and true and beautiful. The prophets unveil for us the mystery that Israel's religion will not be restricted to national Israel. The universal kernel breaks out of the particular husk in which it is enclosed. At this point the links between religion and people, covenant of grace and nation, church and state, believer and citizen remain; a division of the church is only possible by leaving one's land and people. In the future all nations will be blessed by Abraham's seed. Torah, history, and prophecy, each in its own way, point to this glorious future. The day is coming when through the servant of the Lord, the light of Israel will shine upon the nations, and the Lord's salvation will reach to the ends of the earth.

This prophecy was fulfilled in the fulness of time. And again it is noteworthy that the foundation on which the church is built is just as broad as that of Israel. God so loved the *world*, the cosmos, that he sent his only Son, the one by whom all things were created. Granted, the word "world" can have unfavorable connotations in the New Testament. It can signify the organic unity of all created reality as instrument of sin in opposition to the kingdom of Jesus Christ. This "world" lies in wickedness [KJV] (I John 5:19), has "the devil as its prince" (John 14:30; 16:11), who is "the god of this age" (II Cor. 4:4). This world knows neither God nor his children (John 17:25; I John 3:1). In fact, it hates the followers of Jesus as it hated him (John 15:18, 19; 17:14). For this reason "the world and its desires" must be resisted and overcome by faith (I John 2:15-17; 5:4).⁵ It is undeniable that Jesus and his apostles after him were drawn to the "foolish and the weak" of the world, to "publicans and sinners." There is a real fear reflected in their repeated admonitions to be alert to the temptation found in abundance of possessions and in the reminders that this life is one filled with anxiety. Christianity is the religion of the cross; the mystery of suffering is its center. An aesthetic enjoyment of the world as in the Hellenic tradition is not possible. This single notion of "world" shows us clearly how wide a gulf exists between the Christian and the classic worldview.

And yet, the reverse side is not absent. It is true that the Cross casts its shadow over all creation but so does the light of the Resurrection. On the one hand, the kingdom of heaven is a treasure hidden in a field and

5. Translator's note: I John 5:4, "This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith," is one of Bavinck's favorite and most frequently quoted texts of Scripture. It is also the text and title of his only published sermon, *De wereldverwinnende kracht des geloofs* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1901). The sermon was preached in Kampen on June 30, 1901.

a pearl of great price for which a man sells everything he has in order to buy it; at the same time it is also a mustard seed that grows into a tree in which the birds of the air build nests and a yeast that a woman takes and hides in three measures of flour until it is all leavened. While the world is thoroughly corrupted by sin, it is precisely this sinful world that is the object of God's love. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting its sins (2 Cor. 5:19). Jesus, who came to the world not to condemn it but to save it (John 3:16, 17; 12:47), is the light (John 1:12), the life (John 6:33), the Savior of the world (John 4:14). Jesus is the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins but for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). In Christ all things are reconciled to God (Col. 1:20), and under him brought together in unity (Eph. 1:10). The world, created *by* the Son (John 1:3), is also created *for* him as its heir (Col. 1:16, Heb. 1:2). The kingdoms of this world shall eventually become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Rev. 11:15). A new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells is coming (2 Peter 3:13).

It is impossible to express the thoroughgoing universalism of the Christian faith in words more powerful and beautiful than these. Christianity knows no boundaries beyond those which God himself has in his good pleasure established; no boundaries of race or age, class, or status, nationality, or language. Sin has corrupted much; in fact, everything. The guilt of human sin is immeasurable; the pollution that always accompanies it penetrates every structure of humanity and the world. Nonetheless sin does not dominate and corrupt without God's abundant grace in Christ triumphing even more (Rom. 5:15-20). The blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin, it is able to restore everything. We need not, indeed we must not, despair of anyone or anything.

The Gospel is a joyful tidings, not only for the individual person but also for humanity, for the family, for society, for the state, for art and science, for the entire cosmos, for the whole groaning creation.

For the church to be able to proclaim this Gospel in all its richness and freedom, it was necessary for the church to distantiate herself from Judaism. A Gospel so rich created a people of God that could no longer be contained within the boundaries of one nation and country. In the death of Christ all that which is typical and prophetic, priest and sacrifice, law and shadow, even Israel herself finds its fulfillment. The cross of Christ reconciles all things — God and humanity, heaven and earth, Jew and Gentile, Barbarian and Scythian, man and woman, slave and free. On Pentecost, the New Testament church is born as an independent community, independent of temple and altar, priest and sacrifice, independent even of the visible appearance and physical presence of Jesus

himself in whom the disciples had hitherto found their unity. From this point on they would no longer know him according to the flesh. His departure was their gain. Leaving them in body, he in truth came nearer to them in his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit. Through his Spirit he makes his dwelling among them and never leaves them. No matter how small and insignificant it thus appeared, this church was truly catholic, heir of the future, proclaimer of a joy destined for all creatures.

However, the catholicity of the early church was soon severely tested. Jesus had restricted his own preaching and, during his sojourn on earth, that of his disciples, to the lost sheep of Israel. The first congregations in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria were Jewish. Soon the apostle Paul, already on his first missionary journey, established Christian churches of Gentile believers. This development brought about a collision with the Jewish exclusivism that was still very much present in the church and from which the apostle Peter had been set free by a special revelation. When the judaizing tendency became popular, a conflict was inevitable and the young Christian church faced its first dangerous crisis. Paul recognized the absolute seriousness of this struggle. It was a struggle about the catholicity of the church, about freedom in Christ, about the universal significance of the Cross, about the richness of God's grace, about justification by faith alone apart from the works of the law. Was there to be a schism at the beginning, was the exclusivism of the false brothers to triumph over Pauline catholicity? It was precisely in this catholicity that Paul, in his letters, gloried as the mystery of God — "the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6). We know that thanks to the unanimous decision of the apostles the unity and catholicity of the Church was saved at the Council of Jerusalem.

The unity of the churches was thus more or less clearly revealed from the beginning. It has often been claimed that the Christian church, during the period of the apostles, was never a unified organization. To be sure, if one thinks of such unity in terms of a clearly defined organization such as appeared later on, then there is no evidence of such unity. Nonetheless a certain bond between the various individual churches did exist from the outset. It was in the apostles that the churches were one and knew they were one. The apostles did not simply function as the local consistory of the Jerusalem church but were at the same time overseers of all the churches. Jesus himself had called and appointed them as founders of his church. An objective organizational tie may have been absent but a living and personal bond was present for all churches through the office of apostle itself. For this reason, as soon as the Word of God was proclaimed

in Samaria and a group of believers came into being (Acts 8:14ff.), the apostles sent Peter and John who prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Peter's so-called "church visitation" travels, mentioned in Acts 9:32 is adequate proof of such apostolic oversight. In fact, the churches of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria considered themselves so unified that (assuming Tischendorf's reading of Acts 9:31 is, as I believe it is, correct) they were referred to in the singular as ἡ ἐκκλησία.

It was no different in the churches established by Paul on his missionary journeys. In the same way that the churches in Palestine were bound together in unity through the apostles, so the Gentile churches found their unity in Paul. There was a deep and affectionate relationship between them and Paul. He was their founder, his concern for them remained constant, he regularly made personal visits to them and exchanged correspondence with them, and he brought greetings from one church to another. Paul was even supported by one church while he labored in another. Furthermore, the various churches were regionally or nationally considered together as the churches of Judea, Asia, Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia.

In fact, a relationship and traffic even between the Jewish and Gentile churches was not absent. The latter held a collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem and thus breached the dividing wall of hostility with Israel (Acts 11:29; Rom. 15:25-28; I Cor 16:1-5). These gifts of love were a token of the gratitude for the spiritual benefits of which the Gentiles had become partakers; they were an exercise of communion and were received by the Jewish Christians with an equally affectionate response, with much thanksgiving and prayers to God (II Cor. 9:12-14). Indeed the spiritual fellowship that existed between the various churches was more intimate than that of many later churches that are organizationally united in a classis or synod. This fellowship was a manifestation of the unity and catholicity of the church, a manifestation that is purer and more glorious than the most wonderful church order.

It is, in fact, almost unthinkable that this spiritual bond among the early churches should have been absent. The unity and catholicity of the church is a constantly recurring theme throughout the New Testament. It follows directly from the unity of God himself, from the unity of the divine mediator between God and humanity, from the unity of the Spirit, from the unity of truth, from the unity of the covenant and the unity of salvation. It is described and graphically depicted to us by Jesus and his apostles with the images of a vine, a flock, a body, a kingdom, bride and wife, and a temple or building. Jesus himself prayed for this unity and his prayer has been and continues to be heard.

In spite of all that which was still missing of this unity even in the apostolic period, it did and does exist and will also become visible in due time. The churches of the first century differed in origin, in level of culture, in nationality and in location, and had been divided for centuries by differing histories and cultures. A wall of division, a deeply rooted enmity existed between them. And yet Jesus made peace and created in himself one new humanity out of the two. As a result they were one and they knew and initially felt themselves to be one by virtue of love of the Father, through the grace of the Son who is head and Lord of all, in the fellowship of the same Spirit who is poured out upon them all. They were one in baptism, faith, and hope, one as members of the same body with various gifts designed for each other and for the perfection of the saints. This unity was a oneness arising encompassing many nations, all places and all times.

This catholicity of the church, as the Scriptures portray it for us and the early churches exemplify it for us is breathtaking in its beauty. Whoever becomes enclosed in the narrow circle of a small church (*kerkje*) or conventicle, does not know it and has never experienced its power and comfort. Such a person shortchanges the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit and incurs a loss of spiritual treasures that cannot be made good by meditation and devotion. Such a person will have an impoverished soul. By contrast, whoever is able to see beyond this to the countless multitudes who have been purchased by the blood of Christ from every nation and people and age, whoever experiences the powerful strengthening of faith, the wondrous comfort in times of suffering to know that unity with the whole church militant that has been gathered out of the whole human race from the beginning to the end of the world, such a person can never be narrow-minded and narrow-hearted.

It is thus no wonder that the apostles placed this unity and catholicity of the church in the foreground and issued serious warnings against all division. This was a widespread danger as early as the first century. Judaistic and Gnostic, nomistic and antinomistic heresies entered the churches. Now it was indeed necessary that scandals and heresies should come (Matt. 18:7; I Cor. 11:19) in order to bring the church to self-conscious awareness of both its unity and the truth. Nonetheless these *ἄεργαι* and *διχοστασίαι* and *σχίσματα* remain sinful acts and fruits of the flesh (Gal. 5:20), and thus to be resisted vigorously by the church (I Cor. 3:3; 11:18-19, 12:25). In fact, the resistance to those who introduce them in the church is a sacred calling. It is not simply a right but a solemn duty to exercise church discipline against those who disturb the unity of

doctrine teaching and the church. The church is admonished to distance herself from such, to let them go, in order that repentance might take place. Seen in this way the exercise of church discipline is not in tension or conflict with the church's catholicity — on the contrary! It is precisely because church discipline may never become or lead to *καθαίσεις* but rather to *οικοδομή* (II Cor. 13:10) and thus may never be applied in order to get rid of someone, it remains the earnest prayer of the church, throughout the process of discipline, that this last extreme measure commanded by the Lord might bring the stubborn and recalcitrant sinner back to the loving care of the Savior. In discipline the holiness of the church is revealed but no less its catholicity.

II. THE IDEA OF CATHOLICITY IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Whoever moves directly from the New Testament to the literature of the post-apostolic period is struck by the difference in spiritual depth, simplicity, and power. The gospel rather quickly became understood as a new law. The two lines of Scripture concerning the world were not held and developed equally. The small Christian church, powerless and despised in the midst of a hostile world, had first of all to experience deeply the antithesis with the world. Convictions about the imminent return of Christ as well as the heat of persecution compelled them in this direction. It is not to be denied that the vision of the world held by the first Christians was, in general, extremely dark. The apologists saw a work of the devil in pagan culture. Not only the theater but also pagan science, philosophy, and art were strongly condemned by many. Wealth, luxury, and earthly goods were regarded with suspicion. Marriage was not condemned, but a celibate life was still prized more highly. A certain tendency toward asceticism arose rather quickly. The hallmark of a true Christian was a contempt for the world and for death. The second and third centuries are filled with dualism and asceticism. And when the church later became more and more worldly, particularly by and after Constantine, this tendency was strengthened among the most serious Christians. The strong protests of such schismatic movements as Montanism, Novatianism, and Donatism against the secularization (*verwereldlijking*) of the church were either not heard or rejected. The church did not want to go the route of asceticism and separatism. Rather, she desired to become a world church and so she did. However this did not take place apart from the church's acknowledging and incorporating asceticism and monasticism as a corrective element, all the while insisting that this was not to be the universal Christian ideal for all. In this

way, by not categorically rejecting but maintaining the lesser ideal, the church avoided separatism.

In this way the original qualitative distinction between the church and the world was turned into a quantitative one. The original antithesis between holy and unholy became a contrast between good and better, between moral precepts and evangelical counsels. It is here that the Roman worldview can best be understood. It took some time before the Roman view was fully formed, but its basic principle is already present in the second and third century. The motive is clear even if the system is not yet fully developed. According to Rome the "world" increasingly loses the ethical significance it has in Scripture. The natural is not that which is sinful but that which by its very nature is incapable of reaching the supernatural level. The supernatural is a *donum superadditum*. Consistent Roman Catholic theologians deny that original sin is something positive; it is only negative consisting of a loss of the *donum superadditum*. The future of the world before or apart from Christianity is thus actually the same; otherwise humanity would not be created with that *donum*. Nature, the world, is good, not corrupt; it is only missing that which in its own strength it could never reach. The Christian faith, grace, enters the world in order to make possible the attainment of the supernatural, the *visio Dei*. It does not reform and renew that which exists, it only completes and perfects Creation. Christianity is that which transcends and approaches the natural, but it does not penetrate it and sanctify it. With this, Rome, that considers itself to be truly catholic, changes the character of New Testament catholicity. The catholicity of the Christian principle that purifies and sanctifies everything is exchanged for a dualism that separates the supernatural from the natural by considering it as transcendent above the natural.

Creation and re-creation (*schepping en herschepping*) thus remain two realities independent of each other. Nothing remains but a compromise between the natural and the supernatural, between God and humanity, faith and knowledge, church and world, soul and body, religion and morality, quietism and activity. One is compelled continually to weigh and measure with great care, for example, in morality, precisely how far nature can and may go and where the supernatural begins. The Roman principle, at bottom Pelagian, is an "add-on" or supplementary system (*aanvullingssysteem*); the image of God supplements our humanity, grace is added onto nature, evangelical counsels are supplementary to the ethical precepts. Furthermore, it is a principle that affects the very nature of the Christian faith; the pope supplements Christ, the Mass supplements Christ's sacrifice, tradition supplements Holy Scripture, human

ordinances supplement divine commands, love supplements faith, the merits of the saints fill in the shortcomings of the weak. The more stages of holiness one ascends in this life, the higher one climbs in eternity. There are different degrees of punishment as well as different levels in salvation.⁶ The ranking on earth has its parallel in eternity even to the hierarchy of the angels. Thanks to this development, in the same way that nature was the supposition of that which was Christian, so that which is Christian becomes the supposition of that which is Roman. Christianity is no longer the content, it is only the foundation of the Roman superstructure. Christ is the step by which the pope climbed his throne.

It is not difficult from this to see how it became necessary for Rome to set itself over against culture, the state, society, science, and art. According to Rome, Christianity is exclusively church. Everything depends on this. Outside the church is the sphere of the unholy. The goal had to be to bring about the church's hegemony over everything. All authority and power was to be brought under the papacy. Boniface VIII put it clearly in his bull *Unam Sanctam*: "Therefore we declare, say, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary for salvation for every man to be in submission to the Roman Pontiff." To him, Christ's Vicar and representative on earth, has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. His lordship thus extends over the entire world. Thus, while the natural order is in itself good, it is of a lower order. There are occasions when one might be tempted to think that Rome does consider the natural order as corrupted by sin. Popes have often, for example, judged the state to be a consequence of sin. However, the genius of Roman thinking on this matter, appears more and more to consider the natural order as good but of a lower order. The state is the moon, the church is the sun. The state is a human reality, the church a divine reality. Reason and science are good and uncorrupted and are able on their own to achieve much. During the Middle Ages Aristotle had an authority in his sphere equivalent to that of Scripture in its sphere. Only Scripture's authority was of a higher order. Similarly, worldly art is good but ecclesiastical art is better. Marriage is not rejected, but celibacy is the ultimate Christian ideal. Possessions are legitimate, but poverty is meritorious. Practicing an earthly vocation is not a sin, but the contemplative life of the monk has a greater excellence and worth.

6. Translator's note. Bavinck refers here to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* III, qu. 95 and 96.

Rome thus maintains the catholicity of the Christian faith in the sense that it seeks to bring the entire world under the submission of the church. But it denies catholicity in the sense that the Christian faith itself must be a leavening agent in everything. In this way an eternal dualism remains, Christianity does not become an immanent, reforming reality. This dualism is not an antinomy in which one of the realities annuls the other. Rome does not abolish the natural order in Manichean fashion but suppresses it. It leaves marriage, family, possessions, earthly vocation, the state, science, and art intact and even permits them, in their own place, a greater space and freedom than Protestantism tends to do. Nonetheless it downgrades the natural by stamping it as profane and unhallowed. The contrast within which Rome operates is not that between holy and unholy but sacred and profane. This reduces the ethical to something material by regarding the natural realm not as ungodly because and insofar as it is unclean but because it is powerless to achieve the supernatural. Rome thus profanes the cosmos. Now it is true that this Roman principle by the very nature of the case was much clearer during the Middle Ages than in more recent times. The conflict between pope and emperor staged it before our eyes. But Rome does not change and has not conceded any of her claims. In fact the development of Catholicism into Jesuitism presents us with an even clearer picture of Rome's goals than before. The Middle Ages remain the ideal to which all Roman Catholics aspire. The restoration of Thomistic philosophy by the encyclical of August 4, 1879, seals this aspiration.⁷

Obviously such a worldview requires a strict organization; the supernatural realm, in order to be preserved as such a transcendent reality, has to be incorporated into a hierarchical church. To place the supernatural as a power over the natural requires an institution that exists in and of itself, depending as little as possible on people and individuals. The development of both dogma and church occurs simultaneously, the one promotes the other. In this way the deterioration of the catholicity of the Christian faith parallels that of the catholicity of the church. Precisely how the church portrayed for us in the New Testament developed into the church of Old Catholicism and Rome is in many respects still a mystery. But this we do know, namely, that almost from the close of the first century everything pushed toward unity and centralization. Many factors contributed to this: a loosening of the last bonds tying the church

7. Translator's note: the reference here is to Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which gave Thomism an "official" status in the Roman Catholic Church.

to Judaism; the isolated condition in which Christians lived; the minuscule influence they were able to exercise in each area of life; the blaze of persecution that forged them into a unity; the furious attacks on their faith by mainstream learning and philosophy; the heresies and secessions that arose in their own circles; the deeply felt opposition to the entire world of Judaism and paganism; and the genuine love and unity of purpose that governed the early Christians. All these helped to push the church toward consolidation of all local congregations into one catholic church, whose essence was seen to be an institution that stood above them, and which receives its heretofore latest and highest development in the declaration of papal infallibility.⁸

In the early days of the church her self-consciousness about unity was incredibly profound and powerful. It is virtually impossible for us as Protestants, in our age of subjectivism, to truly grasp this. It was possible then, however, for people to believe — and firmly believe it they did in a time when there was only one church on earth — that separation from the existing church was separation from Christ himself. Whoever did not have the church as mother could not have God as father. In Cyprian's words: In the same way that, during the great Flood, there was no deliverance outside the ark, so there is no salvation outside the church. This was the reason for the severity of discipline and the harsh judgment of heretics and schismatics who destroyed the unity of the church and its teaching and drifted off on the stream of the most arbitrary subjectivism. *Extra ecclesiam*, that is to say outside of the existing organized church, *nulla salus*, was the common conviction of all the church fathers, not only of Cyprian and Jerome but also Augustine. In fact, there is no one who defended the unity of the church more strongly than Augustine against the Donatists. His lively, idealistic, imaginative personality loved the catholic church with all the passion of his soul. He delighted in her imposing organization, the rich expression of her episcopacy, the certainty of her tradition, the beauty of her worship, the richness of her means of grace. The church was not the central idea of his thought and life but it was nevertheless its presupposition. Even though his doctrine of predestination appears on occasion to break this unity, nevertheless the latter continues to stand unreconciled next to his ecclesiology. Outside the church, heretics and schismatics are able to participate in everything. "Outside the church he (the schismatic bishop Emeritus) is able to

8. Translator's note: The text of Vatican I's declaration on papal infallibility (1870) can be found in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, II, pp. 262-71.

have everything except salvation; he can have an office, he can have the sacrament, he can sing the Halleluia; he can answer with his amen; he can hold to the gospel; he can possess and even preach faith in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but nowhere can he find salvation except in the catholic church."⁹ In the Donatist schism August sees nothing other than a denial of the promises of God and of love for the church as the one body of Christ.

This remains the Roman position. Whatever has happened and no matter how the unity of the church has been irrevocably shattered, Rome has always maintained the thesis that there is no salvation outside of her. It is true that this teaching does not appear in exactly these words in the official symbols. Nonetheless, councils and popes have repeatedly made the claim. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) makes this claim in its first canon: "There is, however truly one universal church of the faithful outside of which no one at all is saved."¹⁰ The bull of Eugenius IV, *Cantate Domino* (1441), clearly states that no heathen, Jew, heretic, or schismatic will be partakers of eternal life even if he or she should die a martyr's death for the name of Christ. The comparison of the Roman church with Noah's ark, outside of which there is no deliverance, comes up again and again. It is found in the Roman Catechism (I, 10 qu. 13 & 16) and was repeated by Pius IX in his address of Dec. 9, 1854.¹¹

Nonetheless, even Rome has had to accommodate herself somewhat to the undeniable realities of church history. In the first centuries of the Christian church it was still possible to believe that outside of the one ecclesiastical institution there was no salvation, even though already then the complete identification of Christianity with the church was extremely dangerous. However history made this conviction increasingly difficult. In the Novatian, Donatist, and Greek schisms thousands broke fellowship with Rome. In the Arian, Monophysite, and Monothelite controversies many more were shut out of the fellowship of the

9. Translator's note: Bavinck here cites "Super gestis cum Emerito sermo," *Opera Omnia*, Paris, 1555, VII, folio 135 col. 4. The Latin text reads as follows: "Extra ecclesiam totum potest (scil. habere Emeritus) praeter salutem; potest habere honorem, potest habere sacramentum; potest cantare halleluja; potest respondere amen; potest evangelium tenere; potest in nomine patris et filii at spiritus sancti fidem et habere et praedicare, sed nusquam nisi in ecclesia catholica salutem potest invenire."

10. Translator's note: The Latin text which Bavinck cites reads as follows: "Una vero est fidelium universalis ecclesia, extra quam nullus omnino salvatur."

11. Translator's note: Pius IX's decree on the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, was promulgated on December 8, 1854.

one saving church by the dogmatic conclusions of the Ecumenical Councils. In the sixteenth century the Reformation created a division through the whole of Christian Europe. Finally, in our time, of the 400 million Christians in the world not much more than half honor Rome as *mater ecclesiae* or the pope as the Vicar of Christ. In view of this it is becoming extremely difficult for many thoughtful Roman Catholics to embrace this position of their church and to dismiss all Christian faith outside of their fellowship as a sham and hypocrisy. Many theologians have also tried to soften the harshness of this teaching. They make a distinction between material and formal heresy, that which arises from misunderstanding and is not culpable and that which stubbornly and deliberately denies the unity of the church and doctrine. They find support for this distinction in the Roman Catechism (I, 10, qu. 1) which states that not everyone who errs in faith must be considered a heretic but only someone who "disregarding the authority of the church, stubbornly maintains ungodly opinions" (*qui ecclesiae auctoritate neglecta, impias opiniones pertinaciter animo tuetur*). In accord with this, many Roman Catholic theologians were able to make a softer judgment about some erring Protestants and even Pius IX, in his address referred to above, was able to qualify his assertion that there is no salvation outside the church with these words: "It must nevertheless also be held as equally certain that those who suffer from ignorance of the true religion, if this [ignorance] is invincible, are for this not blameworthy in the eyes of the Lord."¹² Even the pope did not dare to define the limits of this ignorance.

On an even more important point Rome appears to contradict herself. The earliest church theologians and synods unanimously rejected the baptism of heretics. Cyprian with consistency concluded that outside the church there is no salvation, no martyrdom, no baptism.¹³ But Augustine hesitated to draw this conclusion and separated church and baptism. Heretics are outside the church and outside of salvation but can still share many of the blessings of the church, including baptism. The baptism of heretics still remains a valid baptism, but it only strengthens the faith in a salvific way when they return to the bosom of the church. This is still Rome's judgment. Our gratitude for this element of catholicity would be greater if Rome did not in its acknowledgement of baptism see proof precisely of her own legitimate claim on us. Our

12. Latin text: Sed tamen pro certo pariter habendum est, qui vero religionis ignoranta laborunt, si ea sit invincibilis, nulla ipsos obstringi hujusce rei culpa ante oculos Domini.

13. *De unit. eccl.* 10 & 12.

baptism has become for Rome the very ground of her intolerance of us. Granted, the claim *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* does not necessarily lead to persecution and punishment of heretics. It was the alliance of church and state that first gave rise to the idea that not only murder and manslaughter, but also heresy and schism were to be punished by the civil magistrate. The idea of a Christian state resulted in the criminalization of heresy. And even then it took some time before this idea became the norm among the church fathers. Nonetheless Augustine's "compel them to come in" had fateful consequences, consequences contrary to his own intention and explanation. Rome made persecution and punishment of heretics an element of the Christian credo. Medieval Councils repeatedly authorized such persecution. Popes regulated these persecutions and called the Inquisition into being. History has made a mockery of the claim that "the church does not thirst after blood" (*ecclesia non sitit sanguinem*). Thomas, the respected authority of all Roman Christianity, declared unequivocally that heretics must not only be excommunicated from the church but also delivered to secular authorities to be destroyed.¹⁴ The Roman Catechism (I, 10 qu. 8) calls all Roman Catholics to believe that heretics and schismatics are under the power of the church "so that those who are summoned by her to judgment may be punished and anathematized." Finally, Pius IX, in his Apostolic letter of August 22, 1851, and in his encyclical of December 8, 1864, condemned the proposition that the church has no authority to coerce, by means of temporal punishments, those who transgress church law.

Thus the catholicity that Rome grants in the area of baptism is taken back with interest. Our baptism becomes the legitimation of her inquisition and intolerance. If one then also considers that Rome is implacable on this matter, then there is every bit as much reason as in the days of Voetius to say with him: "No peace with Rome" (*Nulla pax cum Roma*).¹⁵

The Reformation collides with this powerful Roman position on almost every point. Conventionally, the Reformation of the sixteenth century is seen exclusively as a reformation of the church. In fact, however, it was much more than that; it was a radically new way of conceiving Christianity itself. Rome's world-and-life view was dualistic; her disjunction between the natural and supernatural was a quantitative one. By returning to the New Testament, the Reformers replaced this with a truly theistic worldview that made the distinction a qualitative one. On this

14. *Summa Theol.* II, 2 qu. 4 art. 3.

15. *Pol. Eccl.* II, 527.

matter Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin are one. All attempted to free the entire terrain of the natural from the hegemony of the church. In this they are in agreement with the humanists, who also envisioned emancipation from the church. Notwithstanding this formal agreement, what a difference there is between them! While the humanists argued for the rights of the natural person, who is seen to be good and uncorrupted, the Reformers championed for the freedom of the Christian person, who is emancipated from the law of sin and death by the Gospel. Repudiating the Roman identification of Christianity and church, they can rightly be called the founders of a "worldly Christianity," as Holtzman has called it. The Reformation not only gave us a better understanding of the articles of faith concerning the Son and the Holy Spirit, concerning the church and forgiveness of sins. The Reformation also restored to honor the first article of our universal Christian faith and confessed it with emphasis: "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." In this way they uncovered and restored the natural to its rightful place and purified it from the Roman stigma of being profane and unholy. The natural order is not something of lesser worth or of a lower order as though it were not capable of being sanctified and renewed, but only suppressed and governed. The natural is as divine as the church even though its origin is in Creation rather than re-creation and derives from the Father rather than the Son. It is for this reason that the reformers had such a thoroughly healthy understanding of Christianity. They are ordinary, natural people but people of God; there is nothing peculiar, odd, exaggerated, or unnatural about them, nothing of that unhealthy narrow-mindedness that so often disfigures even sincere Christians. It is true that the Protestant assessment of the world is generally a more somber one than that of Rome. Protestant morality is much stricter, sometimes even rigoristic and puritanical. The Protestant, in fact, believes that sin corrupts and profanes everything, confessing that the entire world "lie in wickedness" and is full of temptation. At the same time, the Protestant acknowledges that the natural order is not unholy in itself and is thus capable of being purified but must not be despised or repudiated. Precisely because Protestants combat sin more seriously than Rome does, they are also able to appreciate the proper worth of the natural order. In Protestantism the mechanical relation of nature and grace gives way to an ethical relation. The Christian faith is not a quantitative reality that spreads itself in a transcendent fashion over the natural but a religious and ethical power that enters the natural in an immanent fashion and eliminates only that which is unholy. The kingdom of heaven may be a treasure and a pearl of great price, but it is also a mustard seed and a leaven.

On this matter, up to this point, all the Reformers are in agreement. However, now we encounter differences. While Luther remained standing here, Zwingli and especially Calvin went further. Repeatedly one finds in Luther remarks such as this:

Christ did not come to change things outwardly but to change persons inwardly in their hearts. The Gospel has nothing to do with worldly matters. . . . [Business and commerce are matters] for which one does not need the Holy Spirit. A Prince can be a Christian but he must not rule as a Christian and as a ruler he is not called a Christian but a Prince. The person is a Christian but the office and princely dignity has nothing to do with Christianity. In sum, Christ wants everyone to stay in their station. All he asks is that whoever had formerly been serving the Devil should henceforth serve him.

Luther thus, like Calvin and Zwingli, frees the earthly realm from the ecclesiastical. However, he leaves it standing without connection next to the spiritual realm and sometimes speaks as though the external is a matter of complete indifference and not capable of ethical renewal. Luther's mistake here is that he restricts the Gospel and limits the grace of God. The Gospel only changes the inward man, the conscience, the heart; the remainder stays the same until the final judgment. As a result, dualism is not completely overcome; a true and full catholicity is not achieved. Re-creation (*herscheping*) continues to stand alongside creation (*schepping*).

Even Zwingli was not able fully to extricate himself from dualism. To be sure, his view of life and the world is quite different from that of Luther. The ideal toward which he strives with unshakable confidence in the truth, was to renew human beings first but then by means of the Gospel also the whole of life, state, society, and world. Zwingli also demonstrated in his practice of reform that he wanted to realize the Gospel's reforming and renewing power in all areas of life. However, when he attempted theoretically to give an account of this, he failed. For him, too, flesh and spirit, human and divine justice continue to stand, in dualistic fashion, next to each other.

Overcoming this dualism completely was the task appointed to the reformer of Geneva. I do not deny that even in Calvin the negative virtues of self-denial, cross-bearing, longsuffering, and moderation are emphasized. Nor do I want to give unqualified praise to Calvin's work of reformation in Geneva, and the means by which he accomplished it. Nonetheless, it is Calvin whose labors completed the Reformation and saved Protestantism. He traced the operation of sin to a greater extent than did Luther, and to a greater depth than did Zwingli. It is for that

reason that the grace of God is more restricted by Luther and less rich in Zwingli than it is in Calvin. In the powerful mind of the French Reformer, re-creation is not a system that supplements Creation, as in Catholicism, not a religious reformation that leaves Creation intact, as in Luther, much less a radically new creation as in Anabaptism, but a joyful tidings of the renewal of all creatures. Here the Gospel comes fully into its own, comes to true catholicity. There is nothing that cannot or ought not to be evangelized. Not only the church but also home, school, society, and state are placed under the dominion of the principle of Christianity. Calvin established this dominion in Geneva with an iron will and implacable rigor. The German reformation, therefore, was a reformation of worship and preaching while the Swiss reformation included a renewal of state and society. The former was exclusively ecclesiastical (*godsdienslig*) in character, the latter also displayed a social and political character. All of this results from the fact that the Bible is, for Luther, only a source of salvation truth, whereas for Calvin it is the norm for all of life.

This new concept of the catholicity of the Christian religion also influenced the reformation of the church. Rome had linked salvation to fellowship with — that is, in subjection to — the papacy. But the Reformed churches did not as the only salvific institution, shut themselves off from Rome and each other. The Reformation ushered in another ecclesiology. Whereas Rome had identified the church with the infallible institution that exists *above* the people, the Reformation concept returned to the New Testament notion of the church as a gathering of genuine Christ-believers, as the people of God. The church, outside of which there is no salvation, was detached from all formal institutions and located in the invisible realm of mystical union with Christ. Unity and catholicity now lack concrete organization but serve as the hidden foundation of all Christendom. In the words of the Second Helvetic Confession:

And seeing that there is always but “one God, and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (I Tim 2:5); also, one shepherd of the whole flock, one Head of this body, and, to conclude, one Spirit, one salvation, one faith, one Testament, or covenant, — it follows necessarily that there is but one Church, which we therefore call CATHOLIC because it is universal, spread abroad through all the parts and quarters of the world, and reaches unto all times, and is not limited within the compass either of time or place.¹⁶

16. *Second Helvetic Confession*, chap. 17; translation from John Leith, *Creeeds of the Churches* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), p. 141.

This altered ecclesiology did, however, give rise to a most difficult and important question: How far can a church deteriorate and still be considered a true church of Christ? How is it possible to preserve the catholicity of the church and at the same time maintain the full character of truth? On the basis of Protestant principles, it was impossible to give an absolute answer to this question. While both the Lutheran and the Reformed churches claimed to be true and pure churches, they still magnanimously acknowledged other churches besides themselves to be churches of Christ. It is true that there were differences among Reformed theologians whether Rome could still be considered an *ecclesia Christi*. While some, such as Polanus,¹⁷ affirmed this to be the case, most were hesitant and preferred simply to speak of vestiges of Christ's church in Rome,¹⁸ while yet others vigorously denied it.¹⁹ Furthermore, they denied just as emphatically that Roman teaching, as such, could be salvific, because the pure truth of the Gospel was so intermixed with idolatry and superstition that it could no longer be a good medicine, no more than wine which is mixed with poison.²⁰

Notwithstanding all this, they acknowledged the baptism of all Christian churches — Greek, Roman, Anabaptist, and Remonstrant — as valid Christian baptism, a baptism that as such obligated the recipient to making a pure confession and joining the true church. This catholicity of the church was applied to such an extent that Voetius hesitated to reject the baptism of the Socinians, even though, as anti-Trinitarians, they were considered beyond the pale of Christianity.²¹ Furthermore, there is a story about Henry of Navarre who, prepared to forsake his faith for the throne of France, asked both a Reformed preacher and a Roman Catholic theologian if salvation were possible in both the Reformed and the Roman Church. The Roman theologian denied the possibility in the Reformed Church but the Reformed preacher was not prepared to say the same about Rome. Henry's response to the Reformed preacher was that since the Reformed faith had only one advocate while the Roman faith was witnessed to by both, it would be more prudent to embrace the Roman faith. I am not prepared to defend the veracity of the story, but it illustrates the point that no Protestant dares to restrict salvation to his

17. *Synt. Theol.* pag. 535 D.

18. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ii.11; *Conf. Gall.* art. 28.

19. Zanchius, *Op. Omnia*, VIII, 81.

20. Voetius, *Disp.* II, 786.

21. *Disp.* III, 760.

own church. The reason is that Protestants have no infallible and absolute mark of the limits of salvation such as Rome has in the authority of the papacy. Instead, the modest and proper conviction of all Protestants, especially the Reformed, has been that we cannot determine the measure of grace whereby someone, notwithstanding many sins and errors, can remain in fellowship with God, and that we cannot establish the extent of knowledge that is absolutely essential for salvation.²²

This conviction led Protestantism necessarily to a significant distinction not only between faith and theology — a much earlier distinction — but also between fundamental and nonfundamental articles of faith. Calvin already made this distinction so as not to give legitimacy to every church secession, including those of the churches that he had reformed.²³ From a Protestant perspective some flexibility on the point of purity of Word proclamation has to be accepted, since otherwise virtually all communal life would be made impossible and the most frightening kind of sectarianism would be fostered. What immediately follows from this is another judgment concerning heretics and schismatics. The harsh anathemas of the church fathers could no longer be taken over without qualification. Lutherans and the Reformed do not inquire at all into the subjective convictions of such people; they believed that heretics were sincere in their errors and simply being true to their conscience in their faith and confession. Rather they dealt with these matters on an objective basis concluding with Augustine: “One lives badly when one does not believe rightly about God.”²⁴ According to Voetius, a heretic cannot be holy and pious.²⁵ Nonetheless, the very notion of heresy and schism were significantly weakened. Rome can call everyone who departed from the church’s teaching a heretic, and Roman theologians can contend that the disposition of faith²⁶ is lost with every heresy. It was no longer possible for Protestants to affirm this, and thus a distinction was made between doubt (*twijfeling*), error (*dwaling*), and heresy (*ketterij*). The term “heresy”

22. Voetius, *Disp.* II, 537, 538, 781, *passim*.

23. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.12, 13; IV.ii.1.

24. Translator’s note: Bavinck cites here an undocumented Latin text: “*Male vivitur cum deo non recte creditur.*”

25. Voetius, *Disp.* III, 761.

26. Translator’s note: The term Bavinck uses here is *habitus fidei*, which can be defined as “the God-given spiritual capacity of fallen human beings to have faith.” (Definition from Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), s.v. *habitus fidei*.)

is now reserved for stubborn and persistent error in fundamental doctrines and thus itself becomes a more fluid notion. And even then it is not entirely incompatible with true faith and regeneration. Believers, too, can fall into a state of heresy, remain in it, and even die in it.²⁷ The name "Christian" may not be denied to heretics as long as we acknowledge their baptism.

Along with this also came a gradual change in the attitude to religious persecution and the punishment of heretics. When the national and state churches arose during the time of the Reformation, the conviction remained for a long time, also among the Reformed, that national and religious unity were inseparably linked together. All the Reformers were far from the conviction that the magistracy had no obligation concerning religion and could be indifferent to the spiritual well-being of the citizenry. Thus, in all the nations where the Reformation prevailed, one confession was elevated as the religion of the realm. Those who dissented were either exiled or tolerated but in no circumstances given equal rights. Even the tolerance of other religions was considered to be a concession warranted by circumstances rather than an obligation of the magistrate. Furthermore, such tolerance as existed did not exclude practices such as denial of full citizenship, prohibition of worship and proselytism, and mandatory attendance at orthodox sermons. All of this is far removed from freedom of religion as we know it, the equal rights of all persuasions. To grant error equal rights with truth, not of course in the church but in society, occurred to virtually no one. After all, truth could not deny itself in the realm of the state; therefore it had to assert itself as truth that is exclusive of error. The absolute character of all truth demanded that it be acknowledged and ruled out all neutrality and indifference in every area of life.

However, on one important point the Reformation did break with the Roman practice of persecuting heretics, namely, on the point of freedom of conscience, a concept to which Rome is implacably opposed. Claiming that all those who are baptized rightfully belong to her, Rome even legitimates the use of force to bring people back into the bosom of the mother church that alone saves. The Reformation had to repudiate all coercion of conscience, not simply because she had won her own freedom of conscience and worship with blood and tears from the tyranny of Rome, nor because she failed to see heresy as dangerous — more dangerous than many crimes, nor yet because she considered conscience

27. Voetius, *Disp.* III, 758.

to be a holy place that could not be defiled by error. Rather, she was in principle opposed to all coercion of conscience because in this area God alone is sovereign and not human. God alone can bind the conscience and no creature may or can usurp this right that is God's alone. Coercion does not avail here. "Faith is a matter of persuasion, not of coercion."²⁸ No one can be saved by a religion he considers false. For this reason no matter how much the rigorous party of the Reformed in our nation sought to enforce public restrictions against non-Reformed religions they never insisted that confessors of other religions be examined or harrassed with respect to their conscience and belief. In fact they explicitly argued the contrary. On a Protestant basis, an inquisition is an impossibility.

III. THE OBLIGATION CATHOLICITY PLACES UPON US TODAY

The history of Catholicism and Protestantism after the Reformation did not live up to expectations. In the sixteenth century, Rome did experience very significant and irrecoverable losses, but she not only continued to exist alongside the Reformed churches, she also got back on her feet and strengthened herself internally at the Council of Trent. She closed herself off completely from the Protestant movement and forever dashed all hopes of rapprochement. Furthermore, in the battle against the renegade heretics, she unexpectedly received powerful support from the Jesuit order. The embodiment and exponent of everything anti-Protestant, this order dedicated itself with all its energy to the destruction of the work of the Reformation. By gaining control of education, this order arrested or reversed the gains of the Reformation in many countries and sought to compensate for its losses to the Reformation in Europe by bringing the Catholic religion to many pagan lands.

In spite of reverses and disappointments, the enmity and hate with which they had to contend, the Jesuits made themselves indispensable to Rome and in particular to the pope. One could say that catholicism and jesuitism were increasingly synonymous. In the declarations of Mary's immaculate conception and papal infallibility, the order of Loyola celebrated its greatest triumphs. That which is Christian is entirely swallowed up by that which is peculiarly Roman. The catholicity of Christianity and the church is restricted to a specific place and person.

28. "Fides suadet, non cogitur"; Voetius, *Disp.* II, 615; *Pol. Eccl.* II.385f., 389, 400.

The pope, with Mary, is the be-all and end-all; it is openly claimed: "where the pope is, there is the church."²⁹

The Reformation in its turn soon lost her youthful courage and freshness. After barely one century, this powerful movement had already come to a standstill and a decline soon followed. During the Middle Ages, in spite of its power and splendor, Rome had not succeeded in bringing everything under the hegemony of the church. Popular poetry and chivalry, the adoration of women, the coarseness of morals, the prevalent licentiousness, the religious mockery and unbelief, all testify to the fact that Christianity was often but a thin veneer covering the natural life of the people. However, the Reformation, no matter how universal in its conception, was even less successful in Christianizing life. Art, science, philosophy, political and social life never fully incorporated the principles of the Reformation. Although dualism was theoretically overcome it remained a practical reality in many areas of life. Even theologians and theology remained to a large extent rooted in the worldview of antiquity. It must be remembered of course that the Reformation was hardly the only factor of modern history. In many areas other than that of the spiritual and ecclesiastical there had awakened, already before the sixteenth century, a desire for freedom and emancipation. Enormous changes in social and political life, the revival of classicism, the development of the natural sciences, and the rise of independent philosophy, were all powerful forces that existed alongside the Reformation from its beginning. When this duality after a period of time became an antagonism, the Reformation, in the circles where it still had the strongest influence, became disillusioned and disheartened, and retreated into itself. Thus that peculiar conception of the Christian life came into being that I will, for brevity's sake, designate as "Pietism." This was, however altered, the same orientation that was represented in the early church by of Montanism, Novatianism, and Donatism. In the Middle Ages the same spirit characterizes many sects and monastic orders, and during the time of the Reformation was found in its most radical form among the Anabaptists. During the period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries it also took form in a variety of religious movements including independentist and Baptist groups, Quakers and Moravians, Pietists and Methodists, in revival movements and Darbyism. To this day it remains one of the most important forms in which the Christian faith comes to expression.

29. "Ubi Papa, ibi ecclesia"; Jansen, *Prælect. Theol. fund.*, p. 511.

In this way it has come about that the catholicity of Christianity and the church, after a history of eighteen centuries, has ended up on the obscurantist light-denying jesuitism of Rome and the other worldly pietism of Protestantism. It is of interest to note some of the striking parallels that exist, alongside the differences between these two movements.

Both movements sin against the catholicity of Christianity and the church and are thus incapable of the Reformation to which we are called today. How the times have changed! In the Middle Ages the church was all-powerful; we cannot consider any aspect of life then without eventually encountering the church. The church was the center of life in the same way that the church building was the center of city and town. The Reformation so dominated the history of the sixteenth century that all other movements were more or less placed in its shadow. However, the emancipatory forces that existed alongside the Reformation have since then grown in power and influence and have, after a brief struggle, gained the upper hand over virtually all of Christendom. A new worldview has arisen that does, to be sure, grant freedom of religion to all that is itself unconnected with Christianity and the church and seeks to eliminate the latter from public life in order to relegate them to private life and thus to reduce them to sectarian phenomena. For the most part, our contemporary culture takes place without reference to Christianity and church. Our situation is thus quite different — a new order prevails. Forces have arisen against which the Christian faith has never yet had to test itself, realities with which the church has not yet come to terms.

Among those realities we must consider are the modern idea of the state with its complete neutrality, the rise of the third and fourth estates that give a quite different shape to society, the new world of finance and business, industrialization, and factory life. All these have greatly complicated social relationships. The field of science, too, brings its challenges including: the application of the inductive method with its remarkable results; the faith in the absoluteness of causality that governs all inquiry; the emancipation of childrearing and education, of schools and universities; the so-called independent science that denies the knowability or existence of God, contests the trustworthiness of Scripture at every point, turns upside down the geo- and anthropocentric view of the universe, applies the law of evolution to everything, and from that one starting point reconstructs psychology, anthropology, ethics, politics, and every other discipline, while allowing theology at best a small discreet place next to the terrain of science. Indeed, we must not think lightly of the forces that challenge, if not the existence, then certainly the catholicity of

Christianity, theology, and the church. In addition, we ourselves, perhaps more than we imagine, are influenced by this modern worldview. Our view of things is quite different from that of previous generations. While life this side of the grave was then chiefly viewed as a preparation for heaven, it now has its own independent value. While an earlier morality, focused on eternity, led to a certain indifference about life on earth, now a greater valuation of the earthly and an intense involvement with material concerns has taken its place. We all participate in the efforts to make this life as tolerable and as comfortable as possible. We attempt to alleviate misery, to reduce crime, to lower the mortality rate, to enhance health, to oppose public disorder, and to limit panhandling. Our differences with an earlier orientation are perhaps not a matter of principle, but we do look at things quite differently.

Rome's position over against this new, modern culture is clear. The Syllabus of 1864³⁰ staked out its position clearly, making no concession to the modern worldview, and declared that the method and principles of Scholasticism were adequate to meet the needs of the day and the further development of science. Leo XIII called up the intellectual grant of the Middle Ages in order to subdue the spirit of the age. And everywhere the Jesuits are diligently at work reconstructing theology and politics, history, and philosophy. In every field they have taken up the challenge and are doing such impressive work that only the naive Protestant or rabid antipapist can fail to acknowledge or appreciate it.

We Protestants, of course, have no pope who issues anathemas on our behalf against all the striving of our age. We have no Saint Thomas we can call up against the storms to which the Christian faith and the Christian church are exposed. Furthermore, many of us are too convinced of the truth of the saying approvingly quoted by da Costa ("Paleology does not triumph over neology") to return simply to a distant past as the solution for the ills of the present. This is also the reason that Pietism in one form or another is so attractive to many Christians today. It is not our intention here to deny the gift that God gave to the church in times of decline through such men as Fox and Wesley, Spener and Francke, Von Zinzendorf and Labadie, Darby and Irving, Moody and Booth. And who would deny the rich blessing that often rested on their work? Their passion, courage, faith, and love were admirable. Their protest against the worldliness and corruption of the

30. Translator's note: The reference here is to Pius IX's 1864 encyclical, the *Syllabus of Errors*, which declared war on all forms of modernism including rationalism, freemasonry, socialism, and liberty of religion.

church was not without foundation. Often they were seized by a holy passion for the honor of God and the salvation of people or else, withdrawing to a life of solitude, they excelled in many Christian virtues.

Nonetheless, there is something lacking in their Christianity. It immediately makes a different impression on us than the truly Christian and also thoroughly healthy worldview of the Reformers. One misses the genuine catholicity of the Christian faith in them. Admittedly these sects did not all or altogether follow through to the consequences of their starting points. They never went to the extreme of the Anabaptists, who repudiated the entire world, state and society, art and science, theology and church, and conceived of Christianity as a radically new creation, descending from heaven just as Christ took his human nature from heaven. But a restrictive, ascetic perspective on the world and its culture does dominate them. Whether withdrawing from the world in Pietist fashion or attacking it and seeking to conquer it by force in Methodist fashion, what is missing here is reformation in the genuine, true, full sense of the word. Instead, individuals are rescued and snatched out of the world — the world that lies in wickedness — there is never a to methodic, organic reformation of the whole cosmos, of nation and country. Thus the periphery is attacked but never the center; the bulwarks but never the fortress itself. It is not a mighty, imposing conflict between the entire church militant and the world in the entirety of its organization as a kingdom under its own master, but rather a guerilla war that weakens the enemy here and there but never triumphs. This is an *individualistic* battle where everyone fights on their own and in their own way rather than in an organized campaign. For this reason the current of life itself is not redirected. The conflict is characterized by a struggle against individual sins while the root of all sins is often left untouched. The unbelieving results of science are rejected, but there is no inner reformation of the sciences on the basis of a different principle. Public life is ignored and rejected — often as intrinsically “worldly” — while no effort is made to reform it according to the demands of God’s Word. Satisfied with the ability to worship God in their own houses of worship, or to engage in evangelism, many left nation, state and society, art and science to their own devices. Many withdrew completely from life, literally separated themselves from everything, and, in some cases, what was even worse, shipped off to America, abandoning the Fatherland as lost to unbelief. It needs to be noted that while this orientation has much about it that is Christian, it is missing the full truth of Christianity. It is a denial of the truth that God loves the world. It is dedicated

to conflict with and even rejection of the world but not to "the victory that overcomes it" in faith.

In similar fashion, this orientation also affected the church. In different ways one encounters denials of the church's catholicity, of its unity as the body of Christ. This is true of Labadism and Pietism, which repudiates all existing churches as "Babylon." It is also true of Baptist and Methodist tendencies to set aside all forms of church polity as impediments to the spread of the Gospel, preferring to attack the world as a disciplined army with beating drums and waving standards. Instead of making a broad and inclusive survey of all churches, carefully distinguishing between true and false, not throwing out the wheat with the chaff, they simply with one fell swoop condemn all churches as false, call all believers to secession and frequently elevate separation itself to an article of faith. Church discipline is then made subject to this vision; its goal become the purity of the group itself rather than restoring the erring and fallen to Christ. The baptism of the existing churches is rejected or acknowledged only with the greatest reservations. Often the focus is shifted from baptism itself to the believer's acceptance.

What is the fruit of all this? Not a reformation of churches but an increase in their number and a perpetuation of division. The rise of sectarianism that has accompanied the Protestant movement is a dark and negative phenomenon. It manifested itself already at the beginning of the Reformation, but it has never flourished as it has in our age. New church after new church is established. In England there are already more than two hundred sects. In America they are innumerable. The differences have become so many and so insignificant that one cannot keep track of them. There are even voices arguing for a new discipline in theology itself devoted to the comparative history of church confessions. What is even more serious is that this sectarianism leads to the erosion and disappearance of church consciousness. There is no longer an awareness of the difference between the church and a voluntary association. The sense that separation from the church is a sin has all but disappeared. One leaves a church or joins it rather casually. When something or other in a church no longer satisfies us, we look for another without any pangs of conscience. The decisive factor turns out to be our taste. Exercise of discipline thus becomes virtually impossible; it loses its very character. What preacher is left who dares, in good conscience, except perhaps in extremely rare instances, to use the form for excommunication? The worst result of all this is that by breaking the unity of doctrine and the church, Christians do violence to the communion of saints, deprive themselves of the Spirit's gifts of grace, by which

other believers labor to build up the saints, shut themselves up in their own circle, promote spiritual pride, strengthen Rome, and give the world occasion for scorn and mockery.

I have no intention, by calling attention to these negative aspects, to deny the benefits that even these forms of Christianity have provided to the Christian life. Without a doubt, there is a glorious truth to be found in Pietism and all the religious movements akin to it. Jesus himself indeed calls us to the one thing that is necessary, namely, that we seek the kingdom of heaven above all and set aside concerns about everything else because our heavenly Father knows what we need. The life of communion with God has its own content and is not exhausted in our moral life or in the exercise of our earthly vocation. The mystical life has its own legitimacy alongside activity; the busyness of work makes rest necessary; Sunday, though situated at the beginning of the work days, does remain next to them. In this dispensation we will never achieve the full harmony and unity that we expect in the future. Some oneness will remain in us as persons and churches. None of us has our intellect, emotions and will, our head, heart and hand, equally governed by the Gospel. However, in order to prevent the "spiritual" (*godsdiensstige*), side of Christianity — that which in the good sense of the term can be called the "ascetic" side — from degenerating into an improper mysticism and monastic spirituality, it needs to be supplemented by the moral (*zedelijke*) — the truly human side. Faith appears to be great, indeed, when a person renounces all and shuts himself up in isolation. But even greater, it seems to me, is the faith of the person who, while keeping the kingdom of heaven as a treasure, at the same time brings it out into the world as a leaven, certain that He who is for us is greater than he who is against us and that He is able to preserve us from evil even in the midst of the world.

Now is this not precisely what the catholicity of our Christian faith requires of us? The Gospel is not content to be one opinion among others of the lie but claims to be *the truth*, the truth that by its very nature is exclusive in every area. The church is not just an arbitrary association of people who wish to worship together but something instituted by the Lord, the pillar and ground of the truth. The world would gladly banish Christianity and the church from its turf and force it to a private inner chamber. We could give the world no greater satisfaction than to withdraw into solitude and leave the world peacefully to its own devices. But the catholicity of Christianity and the church both forbid us to grant this wish. We may not be a sect, we ought not to want to be one, and we cannot be one, without denying the absolute character of truth. The kingdom of heaven may not be of this world, but it does demand that everything in

the world be subservient to it. It is exclusivistic and refuses to accept an independent or neutral kingdom alongside of it. Undoubtedly it would be much easier to leave this entire age to its own devices and to seek our strength in quietness. But such a restful peace is not permitted us here. Because every creature of God is good and not to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because everything can be sanctified by the Word of God and prayer, rejection of any one of His creatures would be ingratitude to God, a denial of His gifts. Our conflict is not with anything creaturely but against sin alone. No matter how complicated the relationships may be within which we as Christ-confessors find ourselves in our age, no matter how serious and difficult, perhaps even insoluble, the problems may seem in the areas of society, politics, and above all, in science, it would testify to unbelief and powerlessness for us to withdraw proudly from the fray and under the guise of Christianity to dismiss the whole of our age's culture as demonic. In the words of Bacon, that would be nothing less than attempting to please God with a lie. On the other hand, faith has the promise of overcoming the world. That faith is catholic, not restricted to any time, place, nation, or people. It can enter into all situations, can connect with all forms of natural life, is suitable to every time, and beneficial for all things, and is relevant in all circumstances. It is free and independent because it is in conflict only with sin and in the blood of the Cross there is purification for every sin.

If we then understand the catholicity of the church in this fashion, it is impossible for us as churches to shut ourselves off from the one, universal Christian church and in isolation to seek salvation for the sorry circumstances in which many churches of our age find themselves. As we take note of the sectarianism that prevails on every side, we might come to the conclusion that the age of churches is past and that each group of believers can do nothing but wait for the return of its Lord in suffering hope. In the Protestant principle there is indeed a church-dissolving element as well as a church-reforming one. The one Christian church has been fragmented into innumerable sects and small churches, assemblies, and conventicles. The hope of an Old-Catholic theologian such as Von Döllinger³¹ to unite all Christian churches was based on little more than a well-intentioned syncretism that has always proved fruitless. However, no matter how harmful the ongoing divisions have been

31. Translator's note: Johann Joseph Ignatius von Döllinger (1799-1890) was a German theologian and church historian whose ultramontanist leanings in the early years of his career influenced the rise of the Old Catholic Church.

for the unity of church and doctrine, the consequences to Christianity itself have not been unqualifiedly negative. They testify to the vitality of the Christian faith, to its power in a people, a power that still moves thousands. The richness, the many-sidedness, the pluriformity of the Christian faith, has in this way become evident. External unity does have an immediate appeal and seems more attractive. Rome lets no opportunity pass to parade its glorious unity in contrast to the divisions of Protestantism. Yet under this external unity Rome hides the same differences and oppositions that the Protestant principle allows to develop alongside each other. For this reason it is not a curse but a blessing that the Reformation refused all false, inauthentic forms of unity and permitted external differentiation of that which did not internally belong together. It is a sad fact of life that the State Churches are still poisoned with this Roman leaven and seek to marshal their forces against Rome by externally uniting faith and unbelief in a way that blunts consciences and corrupts character, resulting in a church life that is thoroughly unhealthy. This is not the smallest advantage that the sects in general and the free churches of our century in particular have gained for us, namely, that they have wrested freedom of religion also from the state churches and have liberated faith and confession from all ties to the state. The Christian religion is once again, as in the first centuries of our era, dependent on its own resources. This will make it stronger rather than weaker in the spiritual struggle. For this reason the free churches undoubtedly have the promise of the future. Only one condition needs to be made here: provided they preserve the catholicity of the Christian faith and the Christian church.

Theologians in a previous era distinguished between fundamental and nonfundamental articles of faith. That distinction was often understood in very mechanical ways with two sets of articles loosely placed next to each other. This distinction was also a strictly confessional designation: Fundamental was defined in terms of the contents of one's own confession. However, understood in an organic way, the distinction does have validity. In the same way that the one universal Christian church comes to more or less purity of expression in individual churches, in the same way the one universal Christian truth comes to more or less pure expression in the various confessions of faith. There is no universal Christianity present *above* the confessional divisions but only *in* them. No one church, no matter how pure, is identical with the universal church. In the same way no confession, no matter how refined by the Word of God, is identical with the whole of Christian truth. Each sect that considers its own circle as the only church of Christ and makes

exclusive claims to truth will wither and die like a branch severed from its vine. The one, holy, universal church that is presently an object of faith, will not come into being until the body of Christ reaches full maturity. Only then will the church achieve the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, and only then will she know as she is known.



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