

Profession of Faith – What Is It, & Why Do It?

Later this month, I hope to offer a class for those who are thinking about making profession of faith in the near future.

During the course of these classes, I use the *Compendium* (which is a shortened form of the *Heidelberg Catechism*) and some other reading materials as a springboard for discussing and considering the Christian faith, as we believe and teach it among the United Reformed Churches.

Most of those who take the course will at some point ask to meet with the elders. The elders, in turn, will ask them about their relationship with the Lord and their beliefs about God the Father, the Bible, Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Church. The elders will ask whether they desire to live in submission to the Lord, and they will ask what that will look like.

It sounds more daunting than it is. In reality, it's a group of sinners who have been redeemed by the grace of God in Christ, who are asking another sinner to testify to the same redemption.

But why do we do it? Why the classes? Why the meetings with elders? Why the public ceremony before we welcome our young people and new members to partake of the Lord's Supper?

In part, we do it to permit our youngest and newest members to show their spiritual maturity. But even more importantly, we do it because God – who has established us as members of His Covenant of Grace – commands us to do it!

Ask yourself: What does it mean to receive the *sign* and *seal* of baptism?

As a *sign*, baptism teaches us about the *nature* of our salvation – how it involves a *washing*, in which Jesus' blood purifies our souls from sin. It also teaches us about the nature of the Christian life, in which we are *continually washed* by the purifying power of the Holy Spirit. As a *seal*, baptism teaches us that this promised washing of the blood and the Spirit is as *real* – and is as *truly ours* – as the water that flowed down our cheeks and wet our shirts.

Baptism, then, is a *passive* sacrament, signifying and sealing God's promise to redeem His people. As such, it's a rite of *Covenant membership*, just like circumcision before the time of Christ.

But the Covenant comes not only with promises. It comes also with *demands*. As our Form Number 2 for the Baptism of Children puts it, "baptism also places us under obligation to live in obedience to God. We must cling to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We must trust Him and love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We must abandon the sinful way of life, put to death our old nature, and show by our lives that we belong to God."

That's not to say that we're out of the Covenant if we sin. (A good thing, too, since we can't *not* sin as long as we live in this fallen world!) Instead, our baptismal form – echoing Scripture – tells us that, although we sin, "we must not despair of God's grace, nor use our weakness as an excuse to keep on sinning. Baptism is a seal and totally reliable witness that God is always faithful to His Covenant."

In other words, we need to receive God's promises with *faith* – the kind of true and living faith that shows itself in every area of our lives. And when we fail, we need to trust Him anyway, resolving by the strength of His Spirit to repent once more.

But that still hasn't answered why we need to *publicly* profess our faith.

To answer that, we need to remember why we have elders. Acts 20, 1 Timothy 1, 2 Timothy 3, Titus 1 – these and many other passages remind us that elders are given a calling both positive and negative. Positively, they are to encourage God's people and equip them to serve. Part of that positive task involves teaching the Church what the Bible says and how it calls us to live. In asking our young people and new members about their faith and life, the elders are testing *themselves* to see if they are accomplishing that part of their calling.

But they also have the *negative* calling to protect Christ's Church from sin and shame. And part of that calling involves ensuring that those whose lives *don't* testify to their faith – or whose love for the Lord is so cold that they can't bother to learn the basics about what He has done for us – are not admitted to the Lord's Table. In this way, those found to be delinquent in the faith are brought to light, and the elders are given an opportunity to encourage them to embrace the Lord with a true and living faith.

Having examined them, the elders then invite these brothers and sisters to profess their faith publicly, in obedience to Jesus' command to acknowledge Him before men (Matt. 10:32-33). This also provides the congregation with the opportunity to rejoice in God's faithfulness to His promises.

But what of those who refuse? What of those who "drift away" or make up excuse after excuse after excuse to not submit to God through His elders?

Their deeds display a lack of faith. God has commanded them to answer all who ask the reason for the hope that they have (1 Pet. 3:15). If they disobey, they demonstrate that they know Him not (Matt. 7:21-23). And

eventually, the elders will have to acknowledge that by declaring Him a Covenant-breaker, no longer belonging to Christ's Church or receiving His promises.

That should bring us to our knees in prayer for our children!

Let us ask God to give us all – from oldest to youngest – a heartfelt desire to proclaim our faith to all who will hear it. And let us truly rejoice each time God demonstrates His goodness by leading another soul to declare that their comfort lies in belonging to their faithful Savior, Jesus Christ!