

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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Church Membership in an Age of Idolatry and Confusion by Kevin Reed

We live in an age of idolatry and confusion. In America today, a man living in a large city may find a multitude of churches near his home. Yet, if a man becomes serious about the Biblical Gospel and the right worship of God, he may quickly discover that he has no real choices among the multitude of religious assemblies that surround him.

A recent book by Professor David Engelsma, *Bound to Join: Letters on Church Membership* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2010) treats the important subject of church membership by means of correspondence originally sent to a group of European Christians grappling with questions about church affiliation. The cover of the book succinctly summarizes Engelsma's main emphases: "[M]embership in a true church is necessary. Every believer in Jesus Christ is duty-bound to join, and never to separate from, a church that has the marks. The duty is urgent, for out of the true instituted church there is no salvation. The duty is urgent because where the marks are, there is Jesus Christ; and where Jesus Christ is, there must every member of Christ be."

Professor Engelsma's book does not purport to be an exposition of Scripture. Rather, the author rests his treatment largely upon selective extracts from John Calvin's "Anti-Nicodemite" writings and the professor's understanding of the *Belgic Confession*. Because the professor does not base his main arguments upon Scriptural exegesis, the historical and creedal arguments are crucial in assessing the book.

Although Professor Engelsma is right to admonish readers to avoid membership in corrupt and false churches, his exhortations regarding church

membership contain: (1) distortions regarding Calvin's treatises (which he quotes selectively), (2) inaccuracies regarding church history, and (3) a neglect of the collective teaching of the Reformation creeds.

Engelsma and Calvin

Professor Engelsma quotes extensively from the Anti-Nicodemite writings of John Calvin.¹ He casts Calvin's dispute with the Nicodemites primarily in terms of church membership. For example, Engelsma summarizes one of Calvin's key sermons as a discourse "on love for the church *and esteem of membership in the church*" (52, emphasis added). But is such a generalization an accurate portrayal of Calvin's emphasis?

Calvin's writings in the Nicodemite controversy must not be viewed as an isolated conflict; they are an extension of his concept of the Reformation as a whole. In Calvin's book, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (1544), the reformer sets forth the preeminent issues that made the Reformation a necessity. Calvin's stated purpose is "to show how just and necessary the causes were which forced us to the changes for which we are blamed."² He writes: "If it be inquired, then, by what things chiefly

¹ Engelsma cites heavily from *Come Out From Among Them: "Anti-Nicodemite" Writings of John Calvin* (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 2001). In the interests of full disclosure: the present writer was involved in the editing and publication of this volume of Calvin's writings, and therefore has more than a passing interest in the manner with which Engelsma employs citations from this book.

² John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 1995 – *Necessity*

the Christian religion has a standing existence amongst us, and maintains its truth, it will be found that the following two not only occupy the principal place, but comprehend under them all the other parts, and consequently the whole substance of Christianity: that is, a knowledge, *first*, of the mode in which God is duly worshipped; and, *secondly*, of the source from which salvation is to be obtained.”³

Rome corrupts both the worship of God and the doctrine of salvation.⁴ Therefore, it naturally follows that the Reformation is a necessity, in order to restore both true worship and the true Gospel. “All our controversies concerning doctrine relate either to the legitimate worship of God, or to the ground of salvation.”⁵ This two-fold emphasis remains pre-eminent throughout Calvin’s writings.

With these overarching concepts in mind – the need for *right worship* and the *true Gospel* – it is easy to perceive the Protestant revulsion regarding the Roman Catholic Mass. As the focal part of Romish service, the Mass constitutes a grand corruption of both the true Gospel and right worship. The sacrificial and meritorious notions of the Mass are blasphemous, combining a denial of the finished work of Christ with the superstitious notion that Mass attendance helps participants obtain the grace of salvation.

It is within this larger context that Calvin produced his writings against the so-called “Nicodemites.” This regrettable designation was based on the spurious arguments of Calvin’s detractors, who sought to justify their behavior by citing the example of Nicodemus, the Jewish leader who, for fear of men, came to Jesus by night. The “Nicodemites” generally lived in Popish countries where all citizens were expected to attend the Mass, and where anyone professing the Protestant faith might bring persecution upon himself. Therefore, the question arose: What should a man do, if he embraces the Protestant faith, and lives in a Roman Catholic country? To openly confess the Protestant faith might amount to a death warrant.

It was this issue of *confession* that was at the heart of Calvin’s dispute with the “Nicodemites.” Some of them had argued that they could remain secret believers (claiming the example of Nicodemus as their excuse).

Such men were resorting to *deception*, because they wished to continue attending Mass, openly participating in Romish ceremonies, yet claiming they could do so while remaining pure within their hearts, since they did not inwardly accept the corruptions of the Mass.

Calvin’s analysis of Nicodemite dissimulation was pointed and severe. From Scripture, Calvin argued that Christians are commanded to flee from idolatry, and to maintain a good confession regarding the way of salvation. “There is no room, therefore, for anyone to indulge in crafty dissimulation, or to flatter himself with a false idea of piety, pretending that he cherishes it in his heart though he completely overturns it by outward behaviour. Genuine piety begets genuine confession.”⁶

It was not primarily a matter of church membership that moved Calvin to rebut the Nicodemites, but their willingness to participate in acts of Romish idolatry, to behave deceptively in their general profession, and to seek justification for their actions from the pages of Scripture. Thus, we must avoid placing a disproportionate stress upon the subject of church membership, as Professor Engelsma does, thereby distorting Calvin’s true emphasis.

At no point does Calvin frame his discussion as a treatise on church membership. While it may be valid to derive implications respecting church membership from Calvin’s expositions, it is a distortion to use the reformer’s “Anti-Nicodemite” writings as if they were a diatribe on church membership – missing the reformer’s main emphases on genuine piety, sincere confession, and right worship.

If we correctly apply Calvin’s teachings on the Gospel and worship, we can observe a two-fold obligation on the part of genuine believers: (1) that believers *separate* from the Roman Church, because it corrupts both the Gospel and worship; (2) that believers *seek fellowship within a true church* which adheres to the true Gospel and right worship.

In places like France, where the Reformed faith was illegal, believers who separated from Rome, and openly confessed the Protestant faith, made themselves targets of persecution. Calvin acknowledged this harsh reality; nevertheless, he stressed the obligation of believers to maintain a faithful witness in the face of persecution. He also made concerted efforts to assist persecuted brethren from other countries, with the result that Geneva became a refuge for many Protestants fleeing persecution in their homelands.

³ *Necessity*, 15. For a more extensive summary of Calvin’s emphasis on proper worship, see the “Publisher’s Introduction” to *Come Out From Among Them: “Anti-Nicodemite” Writings of John Calvin* (Come Out hereafter), 7-30.

⁴ See Calvin, *Necessity*, 13-14.

⁵ Calvin, *Necessity*, 41.

⁶ John Calvin, *On Shunning the Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly*, in Calvin’s *Tracts*, Volume 3, 366.

This last fact has led Professor Engelsma to overstate the case for relocation as the remedy for persons currently living in areas where there is no organized Gospel church. He summarizes Calvin's position in the following language: "Calvin called the French Reformed to leave all behind and come to Geneva" (72). And he speaks of "Calvin's exhortation to leave France in order to join a true church" (78), whereas Calvin was not making a direct exhortation to emigrate. Rather, Calvin was making a response regarding his detractors: a comment that does not carry the construction placed upon it by Professor Engelsma. This fact will become clearer as we consider important facets of Reformation history.

Engelsma and Reformation History

Before proceeding further, we need to be clear about what Calvin (and other reformers) actually said (and did) with respect to isolated Protestants pondering their options. The citation from Calvin, quoted by Professor Engelsma on pages 56-57, includes the following statement by the reformer: "As for those babblers who ridicule us, wondering if one cannot get to paradise except by way of Geneva, I answer: would to God they had the courage to gather in the name of Jesus Christ wherever they are, and set up some sort of church, either in their houses or in those of their neighbors, to do in their place what we do here in our temples!"⁷ In other words, to Calvin, when believers dwell in places dominated by widespread idolatry and general opposition to the Gospel, and where there is no regular congregation, there is the prospect of meeting with others in homes, as a means of reconstituting a true church. In some cases, this amounts to organizing an "underground" church in defiance of existing civil and ecclesiastical authority.

Calvin's homeland – France – was the nation that elicited his Anti-Nicodemite writings. Numerous "underground" congregations were formed throughout the country, with a large number of house churches, many initially existing without a regular ministry. Just as Calvin supported persecuted refugees who came to Geneva, he also encouraged the formation of the French Reformed churches, and assisted the labors of itinerant preachers sent into

⁷ *Temples* here are an analogy to the church, as an application from Calvin's text, *Psalms* 27. Citation from *Come Out*, 192. Although he cites Calvin in the passage including this quotation, Engelsma is short on applications about how this instruction by Calvin might be applied to isolated believers today.

France.⁸ Likewise, John Knox, on journeys from Calvin's Geneva back to his native Scotland, repeatedly passed through France, assisting the French congregations on the way.⁹

J. A. Wylie, in *his History of Protestantism*, provides a brief portrait of how itinerant preachers ministered to French Protestants: "At times, too, though owing to the fewness of pastors it was only at considerable intervals, these little assemblies of believing men and women had the much prized pleasure of being visited by a minister of the gospel. From him they learned how it was going with their brethren in other parts of France. Their hearts swelled and their eyes brightened as he told them that, despite the fires everywhere burning, new converts were daily pressing forward to enroll themselves in the army of Christ, and that the soldiers of the Cross were multiplying faster than the stake was thinning them. Then covering the table, and placing upon it the "bread" and "cup," he would dispense the Lord's Supper, and bind them anew by that holy pledge to the service of their heavenly King, even unto the death. Thus the hours would wear away, till the morning was on the point of breaking, and they would take farewell of each other as men who would meet no more till, by way of the halter or the stake, they should reassemble in heaven" (Volume 2, 525-526).

A recent book by Glenn S. Sunshine, *Reforming French Protestantism*, chronicles the organizational development of the French Reformed churches. The bottom line is that the French congregations, in many cases, began through the initiative of the local people, rather than as a "mission" (or "plant") of some distant church; they formed without the support of the civil magistrate: "the churches organized themselves as specifically religious (as opposed to political) bodies in response to the challenges they faced in the sixteenth-century."¹⁰

⁸ J. A. Wylie provides a brief portrait of how itinerant preachers ministered to French Protestants: See *The History of Protestantism* (London: Vassell, Peter & Galpin, 1874-1877), Volume 2, 525-526.

⁹ Paul Hume Brown, *John Knox: A Biography* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1895), Volume 1, 216-220.

¹⁰ Glenn S. Sunshine, *Reforming French Protestantism: The Development of Huguenot Ecclesiastical Institutions, 1557-1572* (Kirkville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2003), 5. "[I]n the decades preceding the first national synod, French Protestantism had developed along essentially congregationalist lines. Local Protestant churches in the kingdom worked reasonably well to promote their mutual interests without devising

A similar process developed in Scotland, where Knox and his fellow reformers received encouragement from Calvin. "Throughout the early fifties Protestantism expanded its growing influence and gained ever increasing numbers of adherents. Following the pattern already established in France, Protestants began to organize 'privy kirks' in which the Bible was studied and discussed. In some cases, men like Paul Methven and William Harlaw became ministers of congregations.... In this way the new doctrines were spreading underground...."¹¹

At one point, Knox dispatched a letter to his brethren in Scotland, to advise them on how to conduct meetings in these privy kirks.¹² Such preliminary efforts laid the groundwork for the more mature development of the Scottish churches in the years that followed.

In 1555-1556, Knox made a trip to Scotland, preaching to his Protestant brethren, meeting with people in the homes of local noblemen, where believers gathered to hear the reformer's teaching. For those Protestants who had broken with Rome (and expressed their abhorrence of the Mass), Knox not only preached to them, but led them in "the right use of Lord's Table, which before they had never practiced." Recounting these events in his *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, Knox exclaims, "God be praised," that these brethren "to this day constantly do remain in the same doctrine which then they professed, to wit, that they refused all society with idolatry, and bound themselves, to the uttermost of their powers to maintain the true preaching of the Evangel of Jesus Christ, as God should offer unto them preachers and opportunity."¹³ (From this example, we see that Knox's twin

emphases on worship and the Evangel precisely parallel the preeminent themes expressed by Calvin in *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*.)

It is obvious that the situations in both France and Scotland were very fluid during this era, but the general drift is clear enough. These were "grass roots" efforts for Reformation, unlike measures dictated from the top-down, in nations where the magistrates adopted the Protestant faith, and then mandated their faith to the entire citizenry. In France and Scotland during the 1550s, the monarchs and chief rulers were quite hostile to the Protestant faith, and sought to exterminate the budding Reformation. Popish rulers gave public support to Romanism, and sought to compel attendance at the Mass. The ordinary men and women who withdrew from Rome, and began meeting in homes for Reformed doctrine and worship, were brave witnesses to the truth, and their activities became the basis for erecting Reformed churches in both France and Scotland.¹⁴

The situation in the Netherlands developed by similar means.

As in France and Scotland, the groups of secret Protestants that took shape in parts of the Low Countries occasionally grew large and bold enough to seek to institute regular services. In 1544, several citizens of Tournai appealed to Bucer to send them somebody capable of organizing a church. The mission was given to Pierre Brully, a former Dominican of Metz and Calvin's successor at the head of the French church of Strasbourg. Brully preached and seems to have set up functioning churches in Tournai, Valcenciennes, Lille, Douai, and Arras before he was captured after two months in the region and executed. Small conventicles continued to gather after his death in Tournai, but Brully's execution stopped the creation of churches under the cross for a subsequent ten years and

any formal mechanisms for interchurch relations. In fact, the local church continued to be the fundamental unit within the ecclesiastical system long after the adoption of the Discipline..." (37).

¹¹ W. Stanford Reid, *Trumpeter of God: A Biography of John Knox* (New York: Scribners, 1974), 157.

¹² See "A Letter of Wholesome Counsel, Addressed to His Brethren in Scotland (1556)" in *Selected Writings of John Knox: Public Epistles, Treatises and Expositions to the Year 1559* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1995), 325-334; also found in the Laing edition of *The Works of John Knox* (1895), Volume 4, 129-140. Cf. Reid, *Trumpeter of God*, 161-162.

¹³ John Knox's *History of the Reformation in Scotland* edited by William Croft Dickinson, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), Volume 1, 120-122; also found in the Laing edition of *The Works of John Knox* (1895), Volume 1, 247-251. Cf. Lord Eustace Percy, *John Knox* (London,

1937; rpt. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), 189-191; James S. McEwen, "John Knox and the Sacraments," chapter 3 of *The Faith of John Knox* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961), 45-60.

¹⁴ The subsequent historical developments in France and Scotland took very different turns. Fierce persecution in France resulted in the deaths and flight of most of the Reformed. (Read the histories of them.) Yet in Scotland, the Reformed faith eventually became the established religion.

spurred many of those in the early churches to flee abroad....

Renewed efforts to organize individual congregations under the cross began in 1554-55 in the great commercial metropolis of Antwerp. To impede the detection and denunciation of its members, the new church divided itself into sections of eight to twelve members; only a few sections would gather at a time to hear the sermons of the church's ministers, who served for brief periods before returning to a place of exile such as Emden. In 1557 a Reformed church with a consistory was founded in the small Zeeland port of Flushing; another may have taken shape in Zierikzee. The dramatic growth of the Huguenot movement in France between 1559 and 1562 spilled across the border and led to the organization of churches in several Walloon communities, most notably Tournai and Valenciennes, which in short order became the greatest centers of Reformed strength in the Low Countries in this period. By early 1566, regular congregations are known to have been formed in at least sixteen communities between Zeeland and Hainaut, none north of the great rivers of the Rhine and Maas. In the same period, as many as twenty five itinerant preachers evangelized the countryside of industrial West Flanders. The number of underground churches was far smaller than in France, but the way in which the movement developed was similar.¹⁵

The "underground" congregations are important in another respect, for it is from within this setting that several of the early Reformed confessions were composed.

...Guy de Bray [or, Guido de Bres], a native of Mons who studied in Geneva and Lausanne in 1557-1558, was the driving force behind the re-establishment of church assemblies in and around Tournai. Soon after he returned to the area, he drafted a confession of faith that he tossed into the chateau of Tournai with a letter announcing defiantly it was too late to extinguish the pure light of the Gospel, for thousands of believers were prepared to die for it. De

Bray circulated his writing to several other ministers in the region for their approval. Published in French in 1561 and in Dutch in 1562, this *Belgic confession of faith*, as it came to be called, derived much of its structure and wording from the 1559 *French Confession*, while taking several articles directly from a confession that Theodore Beza drafted in Lausanne....¹⁶

To some readers, our discussion about house churches and underground assemblies may seem a bit of a detour; but the importance of these congregations should not be overlooked. These congregations were an integral part of Calvin's thinking and practice, as he addressed questions about the believer's duty regarding the true church.

For Calvin, as well as Knox, church membership, *per se*, is not the driving factor: *the Gospel and proper worship are the preeminent issues*. Believers have a duty to separate from Rome because of popish idolatry and corruption of the Gospel. The principal reasons believers are commanded to come together are to uphold the true Gospel and to worship God rightly. Certainly these truths have ramifications regarding church membership, but Professor Engelsma's stress on church membership leaves the impression that Calvin is obsessed about church membership.

Engelsma writes: "Basic to everything Calvin said to the Nicodemites was his conviction that the Bible insists on membership in a true, instituted congregation and on every believer's regular participation in public worship in a true church" (38). It would be more accurate to say: Basic to everything Calvin said to the Nicodemites was his conviction that *the Bible insists on right worship and a sincere confession, and thus every believer must separate from the idolatrous worship of Rome, and seek to worship God faithfully in a true congregation of believers*.

Engelsma opens one of his letters, stating he will "continue quoting Calvin on the necessity of belonging to a true, instituted church and on the evil of neglecting membership" (43). A more accurate summary might be that he is quoting Calvin on *the importance of public worship and the danger to those who willfully neglect the public ordinances*.

¹⁵ Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 178-180.

¹⁶ Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism*, 178-180. For a detailed historical study on the *Belgic Confession*, see Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

Calvin's burden here is to rebut "those who suppose themselves so hardy as to have no use for this external program," in contrast to "whoever has no means of being in the Christian church, where God is worshipped purely." After all, "the true use of the entire order of the church...is for us to serve God in purity."¹⁷

Engelsma further says Calvin was writing "against those who supposed that they could be good Reformed people and children of God without being members of a soundly Reformed church, indeed, in some cases while worshiping (outwardly) in a Roman Catholic church" (53). Again, the professor's summary misses Calvin's emphasis. In Calvin's sermon on *Psalm 27:4*, the reformer is inveighing against, "the horrible dissipation in the world today, in that all the worship of God is corrupted and that the word of God is falsified and the sacraments are bastardized" (Engelsma, 53). The proper response of the faithful is not to remain in such idolatry, but "to assemble to confess our faith."¹⁸

Engelsma states that the "error of the Nicodemites is the fond conviction that it is not necessary to belong to a true, instituted church of Christ if the circumstances of one's life make this inconvenient." At the very least, this statement represents a gross oversimplification, for the fundamental error of the Nicodemites, for which Calvin took them to task, was their opinion that they could continue participation in the idolatrous rites of Rome, and need not confess their faith outwardly, so long as they held right sentiments in their hearts (that is, outward conformity, with inward dissent). Such an action was totally unworthy of a Christian, and Calvin calls upon believers to make the "good confession" (*cf. 1 Timothy 6:13*). As cited earlier: "There is no room, therefore, for anyone to indulge in crafty dissimulation, or to flatter himself with a false idea of piety, pretending that he cherishes it in his heart though he completely overturns it by outward behaviour. Genuine piety begets genuine confession."¹⁹

Certainly Calvin's call to make a good confession is related to his teaching that we "assemble to confess our faith," but it is the *forsaking of idolatry and duplicity*, and the *confession of our faith* that are the principal issues here. To reduce Calvin's argument to a diatribe on church membership is to miss the larger picture. And this is a fundamental

flaw throughout much of Professor Engelsma's book: his letters result in distortion by both *omission* and *emphasis*.

Before moving forward, let us recall how Calvin mentions the option of believers worshiping in homes to begin organizing new churches: "Would to God they had the courage to gather in the name of Jesus Christ wherever they are, and set up some sort of church, either in their houses or in those of their neighbors, to do in their place what we do here in our temples!"²⁰ We noted that Calvin's comment here reflects a practice encouraged by Calvin and other Reformers, as a means of reconstituting the true church. Engelsma acknowledges this idea in passing several times (37, 71, 124), but he never develops the concept to any useful extent. Instead, Engelsma launches a lengthy admonition regarding the duty to relocate, perhaps to other lands, in order to join a true church: "With regard to moving, house, land, job, and possessions may not stand in the way. Nor may citizenship in a country. Citizenship in the kingdom of Christ, bound up, as we have seen, with the membership in the true church, takes precedence over citizenship in an earthly kingdom. Sacrifice may very well be required" (72).

In this argument for relocation, Engelsma glosses Calvin's writings claiming, "Calvin called the French Reformed to leave all behind and come to Geneva," again speaking of "Calvin's exhortation to leave France in order to join the true church" (72, 78). Neither Calvin's text nor the historical evidence supports this gloss. Moreover, given that the professor's original correspondents lived in the U.K., the net effect of glossing Calvin and urging relocation in the same breath, can easily leave the impression that these correspondents are being admonished to move to America, especially since the Professor also touts his own denomination as a true church, in contrast to the dismal prospects of finding a true church in the U.K. (see 66ff).²¹

²⁰ See Calvin, *Come Out*, 192, and Engelsma, 56-57.

²¹ At the outset of the book, Engelsma speaks of "the British Isles, where the doctrine of the church is deplorable." In this general assessment the professor is correct, although he does not explore *why* this has been so historically. From its beginning, the English Reformation was seriously defective, and the deficiencies of the English Reformation cast a long shadow on English ecclesiastical matters even to the present day. The sound practice of church discipline was never established in the English church, and the "Elizabethan Settlement was a Nicodemite settlement," since Elizabeth and her chief ecclesiastical officers had lived in

¹⁷ Calvin, *Come Out*, 183, 192-193, 195; citations in Engelsma, 45, 56-57, 62.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Come Out*, 188-190; Engelsma, 53-54.

¹⁹ See note 6 above.

Engelsma and the Reformed Creeds

Professor Engelsma makes passing reference to several Reformed creeds, but he is primarily concerned with the teaching of the *Belgic Confession*. This emphasis is understandable, since it is among the doctrinal standards of his denomination. Nevertheless, Engelsma writes as if his own views reflect the teaching of the Reformed creeds generally, and the *Belgic Confession* in particular. But to what degree do his views truly reflect the collective teaching of the Reformed creeds? What do the Reformed confessions actually teach about the church?

The great Reformed creeds came from various nations: The *French Confession of Faith* (1559), the *Scottish Confession* (1560), and the *Belgic Confession* (1561). Additionally, there is one brief creed which preceded these three: the *Confession of the English Congregation at Geneva* (1556).

When thinking of the Reformed Confessions, we are prone to consider them with an *ex post facto* outlook, forgetting the original struggles that gave birth to these documents. The aforementioned creeds, composed in a brief span of about five years, were produced by churches under persecution or in irregular conditions. In other words, the early Protestant confessions furnished a means for expanding the testimony and fostering the organization of the Reformed churches, rather than being the composition of mature, fully-formed churches.²² By contrast, the *Canons of Dordt* and the West-

a dissembling manner during the previous reign of Mary (Diarmaid MacCullough, *The Boy King: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation* [New York: Palgrave, 1999], 189, 195). Except during the brief ascendancy of Puritanism in the mid-1600s, the Elizabethan settlement and a lack of discipline have remained central to English ecclesiastical scene. See the Appendix, "The 'English' Problem."

²² J. A. Wylie notes: "The Belgic Creed is notable in another respect. It first saw the light, not in any synod or Church assembly, for as yet the Church of the Low Countries as an organized body did not exist; it had its beginning with a few private believers and preachers in the Netherlands. This is a very natural and beautiful genesis of a creed, and it admirably illustrates the real object and end of the Reformers in framing their Confessions. They compiled them, as we see these few Flemish teachers doing, to be a help to themselves and to their fellow-believers in understanding the Scriptures, and to show the world what they believed to be the truth as set forth in the Bible..." (*The History of Protestantism*, Volume 3, 33.) Cf. Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism and Confessional Revision* (reprinted from the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, July, 1891), 16.

minster Standards, in the following century, were produced in state-sanctioned assemblies, meeting in open session, with more time for study and deliberation. The historic context of each creed must be taken into account, if we are to rightly understand its structure and contents.²³

Given the common historic context of the three major confessions – *French*, *Scottish*, and *Belgic* – certain preeminent themes appear consistently in all of them. Basic teachings about God and the Trinity were not in dispute with Rome, but they were under attack by certain infidels and elements among the Anabaptists; hence the Protestant confessions provide a concise testimony regarding the eternal nature of God, his attributes, and his work as Creator.²⁴ These creeds also maintain teachings of sovereign grace in salvation (particularly noting man's inherent guilt and inability, as well as God's absolute sovereignty), in contrast to both Rome and Anabaptists.²⁵ Large sections of these confessions expound upon the person and work of Christ.²⁶ There are specific articles treating the subject of good works, specifically rebutting Romish notions of human merit.²⁷ From these portions of the creeds, we can clearly discern what the Reformed churches meant, when they spoke of the *Gospel*, the *Evangel*, or the *way of salvation*.

There are additional sections of the Reformed confessions that should not be overlooked. At root, each of these creeds is based upon the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, declaring the authority

²³ That's not to say that the assemblies of Dordt and Westminster met in a leisurely environment. The Synod of Dordt was dealing with a national theological crisis, and the Westminster Assembly convened during the English Civil War. Nevertheless, the assemblies at Dordt and Westminster came after the turn of the century, enabling them to build upon the scholarship and ecclesiastical institutions that were the fruit of the sixteenth-century Reformation.

²⁴ Cf. *French Confession* (FC hereafter), articles 1, 6-8; *Scottish Confession* (SC hereafter), articles 1-2; *Belgic Confession* (BC hereafter), articles 8-14; *Confession of English Congregation at Geneva* (CECG hereafter), article on "I believe in God..."

²⁵ Cf. FC, articles 10-12, 20; SC, chapters 3, 8, 12; BC, articles 14-16; CECG, article on "Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord..." and on "the communion of saints."

²⁶ Cf. FC, articles 12-19, 24; SC, chapters 4, 6-11; BC, articles 17-23, 26; CECG, article on "Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord..." and following.

²⁷ Cf. FC, article 24; SC, chapters 13-15; BC, articles 17-23, 26; CECG, article on "the forgiveness of sins."

and sufficiency of Scripture.²⁸ The assertion of Scriptural authority was necessary, because both Rome and the Anabaptists claimed additional sources of authority, either residing in the institutional church or in supposed new revelations by the Spirit. The Romish claims of supplemental ecclesiastical authority were a threat not only to the Biblical Gospel, but were also at the heart of disputes over the right way of worship.

Moreover, all of these Reformed confessions condemn the idolatry of Rome, not only on the grounds that popish ceremonies undermine the Gospel of grace, but also because Romish elements of worship lack a Biblical warrant, and thus undermine the sufficiency of Scripture. Idolatry is committed not only by worshiping false gods, but also from worshipping God in ways that he has not established in his Word.²⁹

Because of the pollutions of worship within Romanism, as well as the corruption of the Gospel, the *French Confession* declares it to be the duty of believers to separate from the popish church: "Properly speaking, there can be no church where the Word of God is not received, nor profession made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments. Therefore we condemn the papal assemblies, as the pure Word of God is banished from them, their sacraments are corrupted, or falsified, or destroyed, and all superstitions and idolatries are in them. We hold, then, *that all who take part in these acts, and commune in that church, separate and cut themselves off from the body of Christ*" [emphasis added].³⁰

The *Scottish Confession* likewise condemns man-made worship and religious ordinances, and also explains the right use of the sacraments.³¹ The *Belgic Confession*, in speaking of the false church, says: "[The false church] ascribes more power and

authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ. Neither does she administer the Sacraments, as appointed by Christ in his Word, but adds to and takes from them as she thinks proper; she relieth more upon men than upon Christ...."³²

The basic principle regarding worship, as espoused in the Reformed creeds, is summarized most succinctly, perhaps, in the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), question 96. "What doth God require in the second commandment? *Answer*. That we in no wise represent God by images, nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his word." Based upon this simple precept, the Romish way of worship fails completely. It is thus unconscionable for genuine believers to remain with the Papists, for Rome has rejected both the Biblical way of salvation and the Scriptural way of worship.

Faced with disputes about Scriptural authority, the way of salvation, and the way of worship, Rome resorted to another line of defense. Popish apologists often produced lengthy lists of "marks" by which the true church could be discerned. Of course, the Romish marks were designed to predispose the case in favor of Rome.³³

In contrast to Romanists, the Reformed confessions use three basic marks (or "notes") to distinguish between the false church (Rome) and the true church (the Reformed). That is not to say there are no other false churches besides Rome. Yet, Romanism is the preeminent false church, much as the papacy is the consummate Antichrist.³⁴

In speaking of the marks of the church, we should be clear: as Protestants, we are speaking about the *visible church*, since we are describing ways, by outward observation, of assessing the

²⁸ Cf. *FC*, articles 2-5; *SC*, chapters 19-20; *BC*, articles 2-7; regarding the English Congregation at the Geneva, the defense of Scriptural authority, especially as applied to worship, is located in the Preface which accompanies both the *Confession* and the book of order produced by the church.

²⁹ *FC*, "Address to the King." Cited from Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*. Cf. *FC*, articles 2-5, 24; *SC*, chapters 19-20; *BC*, articles 2-7; regarding the English Congregation at Geneva, the defense of Scriptural authority, especially as applied to worship, is located in the Preface which accompanies both the *Confession* and the book of order produced by the church.

³⁰ Article 28.

³¹ Cf. *SC*, chapters 9, 14; also, *Scottish First Book of Discipline*, "Explication of the First Head."

³² *BC*, article 29.

³³ See William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (1862; rpt. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), Volume 1, 20-26; James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; rpt. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960, 1974), Volume 1, 54-68; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (translated by John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), Volume 4, 307-325. For recent comments on this topic by the present author, see Kevin Reed, *Imperious Presbyterianism* (Unicoi, Tennessee: Trinity Foundation, 2008), 14-19.

³⁴ There are many Antichrists gone out in the world, but there is one prominent "man of sin, and son of perdition" who was prophesied. Likewise, there are many false churches and sects in the world, but the Roman Church is one that was prophesied in the visions recorded in *Daniel* and *Revelation*.

basic character of a church.³⁵ For this reason, Reformed creeds distinguish between the universal church of the elect (sometimes called the “invisible church” – because it is not visible to the eyes of men, being composed of the company of all the redeemed throughout all time, and in all places) and local congregations of believers who profess the Christian faith.

As the *Scottish Confession* clearly states, the universal church consists of “the elect of all ages, all realms, nations, and tongues...who have communion and society with God the Father, and with his Son Christ Jesus, through the sanctification of his Holy Spirit...” Outside of this church, “there is neither life, nor eternal felicity.” “This kirk is invisible, known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen, and comprehends as well (as said is) the elect that are departed (commonly called the kirk triumphant), as those that yet live and fight against sin and Satan as shall live hereafter.”³⁶

In describing the *visible* church, the *French Confession* says,

[I]t is important to discern with care and prudence which is the true church, for this title has been much abused. We say, then, according to the Word of God, that it is the company of the faithful who agree to follow his Word, and the pure religion which it teaches; who advance in it all their lives, growing and becoming more confirmed in the fear of God according as they feel the want of growing and pressing onward....³⁷

[T]here can be no church where the Word of God is not received, nor profession

³⁵ The *CECG* makes this distinction perfectly clear, saying, “But that church which is visible, and seen to the eye, has three tokens, or marks, whereby it may be discerned.”

³⁶ *SC*, chapter 16. This statement in the *SC* echoes the *CECG* which, in expounding the meaning of the expression “holy catholic church,” states: “I believe therefore and confess one holy church, which (as members of Jesus Christ, the only head thereof) consents in faith, hope, and charity, using the gifts of God, whether they are temporal or spiritual, to the profit and furtherance of the same. *Which church is not seen to man's eye, but only known to God*: who of the lost sons of Adam, has ordained some, as vessels of wrath, to damnation, and has chosen others, as vessels of his mercy, to be saved; the which also, in due time, he calls to integrity of life and godly conversation, to make them a glorious church to himself” (*emphasis added*). This is the church of the elect.

³⁷ Article 27.

made of subjection to it, nor use of the sacraments. Therefore we condemn the papal assemblies, as the pure Word of God is banished from them, their sacraments are corrupted, or falsified, or destroyed, and all superstitions and idolatries are in them.³⁸

The *Scottish Confession* states matters in very graphic terms:

[I]t is a thing most requisite that the true kirk be discerned from the filthy synagogue, by clear and perfect notes, lest we, being deceived, receive and embrace to our own condemnation the one for the other. The notes, signs, and assured tokens whereby the immaculate spouse of Christ Jesus is known from that horrible harlot, the kirk malignant; we affirm are neither antiquity, title usurped, lineal descent, place appointed, nor multitude of men approving an error....

The notes, therefore, of the true kirk of God we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the word of God, into the which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles do declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, which must be annexed unto the word and promise of God, to seal and confirm the same in our hearts; last, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed, and virtue nourished. Wheresoever then these former notes are seen, and of any time continue (be the number [of persons] never so few, about two or three) there, without all doubt, is the true kirk of Christ: who, according to his promise is in the midst of them: not that universal kirk (of which we have before spoken) but particular; such as were in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, and other places in which the ministry was planted by Paul, and were of himself named the kirks of God.³⁹

There are two aspects of this statement worthy of emphasis: first, the stress is upon Christ's presence with his people in local (“particular”) congregations, showing that this is the focal point of applying the marks. A second important detail is the

³⁸ Article 28.

³⁹ *SC*, chapter 18.

reality that the true church of Christ might be found if there are but “two or three” persons maintaining the marks. (The marginal Scripture reference to *Matthew* 18[:19-20] underscores the point being made here.)

We might wonder how a church with a mere handful of people can actually maintain the marks. Unless one among them is a pastor, how can the preaching of the Word and the sacraments be upheld, much less discipline administered without regular officers? The answer lies in seeing the historic context of this *confession*. Many underground Reformed churches (the “privy kirks” in Scotland) may have been lacking a regular pastor; their opportunities for observing the sacraments may have been limited. Nevertheless, they had these marks, in clear contrast to the popish assemblies surrounding them. Such small congregations of Protestants may have waited many weeks (or in some cases months) between visits of itinerant preachers. Or in some cases, a small congregation may have developed to choose its own officers, after recognizing the gifts and graces of God among men in their midst.

Regarding such self-organization by a church, William Cunningham remarks, “the absence of a regular ministry, appointed in the ordinary prescribed way, or even the absence of a ministry altogether for a time, is not necessarily, and in all circumstances, a sufficient proof of itself that a society of professing Christians is not a church of Christ: and secondly, that any company of faithful or believing men is entitled to a ministry, since Christ has given the ministry to the church; and if they are so placed in providence that they cannot have a ministry in the ordinary, regular, prescribed way, are entitled to make a ministry for themselves, and that that ministry, though not a regular, is a valid one.”⁴⁰

There is an accessory truth that should be kept in mind: the Reformed creeds were written at a time of religious turmoil and persecution; they exhibit a very strong pastoral perspective. People were troubled. They needed guidance on how to discern a sound church. They also needed reassurance and comfort, that if they aligned with the Protestant cause, it was for the good of their souls, regardless of any hardship or persecution that might come.

⁴⁰ *Historical Theology*, Volume 1, 27-35. Cunningham is explaining Protestant confessional teaching, in contrast to Rome’s teachings. Herman Bavinck asserts essentially the same doctrine in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 4, 375-377.

In this context, then, the Reformed creeds set forth the marks of a true church, as both rebuttal to Rome, and as a means of pastoral guidance for the people. Are you troubled about which church to join? Then look for these “marks”: the truth of the Gospel, the sacraments rightly administered, and church discipline properly exercised. If you find these characteristics, you can rest in good conscience, knowing that you have found a genuine congregation of Christ’s people (with Christ in their midst), and not a counterfeit assembly.

The *Belgic Confession* reflects this pastoral outlook regarding the marks of the church:

We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true Church, since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church....

The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.⁴¹

Based on the foregoing theology and pastoral outlook, the Reformed creeds draw out the implications regarding church membership in the stark relief of black and white. Faced with the competing claims between Rome and the Reformed churches, there simply is no middle ground. It is the sacred duty of Christians, in confessing Christ, to separate from the false church, and join the true church. (Of course, joining the true church infers associating with a local congregation, or laboring to form one, since that is where the visible church finds its most basic manifestation.)

Article 26 of the *French Confession* adds: “We believe that no one ought to seclude himself and be contented to be alone; but that all jointly should keep and maintain the union of the Church, and submit to the public teaching, and to the yoke of Jesus Christ, wherever God shall have established a true order of the Church, even if the magistrates and their edicts are contrary to it. For if they do not take part in it, or if they separate themselves from

⁴¹ Article 29. Compare this article of the *BC* to the summary statement in the *CECG*, regarding the “holy catholic church” and “communion of saints.”

it, they do contrary to the Word of God.” This declaration is combined with the section from chapter 28, quoted earlier, that condemns the papal assemblies, saying “that all who take part in these acts, and commune in that Church, separate and cut themselves off from the body of Christ.”

Moreover, as Professor Engelsma reminds us in his book, the *Belgic Confession* (article 28), echoing the *French Confession*, teaches

that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them. And that this may be better observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from those who do not belong to the church, and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God hath established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes be against it; yea, though they should suffer death or bodily punishment.

Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same, or do not join themselves to it, act contrary to the ordinance of God.

There is a further aspect of the Reformed confessions that should not be ignored. In rejecting Rome, these creeds espouse a Reformed view of the sacraments, quite distinct from Lutheranism. Moreover, the general teachings of the Reformed confessions on worship and discipline constitute a rejection of Anglican practices of worship and government. By setting forth measures that scrutinize right worship and discipline, the Reformed creeds, by implication at the very least, call into question the status of the Lutheran and Anglican churches (as well as the Anabaptists and Eastern Orthodox). Thus, while the contrast between the Reformed and Rome is absolute (when distinguishing between the true and false churches), the Reformed differences with the Lutherans and Anglicans were less severe.

Professor Engelsma acknowledges this fact by raising the subject of “erring” churches, saying

“[T]he Reformed faith and theologians regarded the Lutheran churches as true churches of Christ, although erring seriously in a vitally important aspect of the faith and life of the Christian religion. Their refusal to judge the Lutheran churches as false churches did not betray any minimizing of the seriousness of false doctrine on the part of the Reformed churches. Such was the gravity of the Lutheran error, in the judgment of the Reformed theologians, that it necessitated separate Reformed churches at the cost of much struggle, sacrifice, and even persecution – persecution by the Lutherans” (31).

Indeed, these historic facts, by Engelsma’s own admission, “must be taken into account in one’s understanding of the seemingly absolute distinction of Article 29 of the *Belgic Confession* between the true church and the false church.”⁴² Elsewhere, the professor is dismissive of nuances (see 123ff), but this is one nuance that is undeniable.

Here Professor Engelsma has alluded to an issue treated in chapter 25 of the *Westminster Confession*, “Of the Church.” The chapter begins by distinguishing between the universal church of the elect, and the visible church, defining the visible church as “all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children....”

As we saw earlier, the marks of the church are related to the visibility of the church. If a church clearly bears the marks, then it is to be regarded as an assembly of Christ’s people. But what if those marks are somewhat obscured?⁴³ What about churches that are “erring” in some important way, as Professor Engelsma characterized the Lutheran assemblies?

The *Westminster Confession* speaks to such nuances in the following language: “This catholic church has been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as

⁴² *Bound to Join*, 31. If the historic context informs the very definitions of the creed (and, yes, context must inform definitions), shouldn’t the historic formation of house churches and other underground assemblies (existing as part of the strategy of the authors of the Reformed confessions) inform the meaning of the believer’s duty to join himself to the true church, since those “privy” congregations became the means of reconstituting the church in France, Scotland, and the Netherlands?

⁴³ Consider that the *BC*, article 27, states that the visibility of the church may be obscured at times, when she is “very small, and, in the eyes of men, to be reduced to nothing”; cf. Engelsma, 127.

the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.”

Note, when the *Westminster Confession of Faith* speaks of churches “more or less pure,” it measures them “according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them” (25:4). This emphasis on the *Gospel* and *worship* is but a continuation of the keynote themes we observed previously in the writings of the Reformers and the Reformed creeds. Less pure churches are not specifically named here, but the general principles surely apply to such bodies as the Lutherans and Anglicans, thus reflecting the same historic reality acknowledged by Professor Engelsma. Later in his book, Professor Engelsma actually cites this section of the *Westminster Confession* (96).

Once we recognize the reality that a particular true church may be “less pure” than another true church, the question of church membership becomes more complex. For example, contemporary churches (including some professing to be Reformed) use elaborate liturgies and ceremonies, sanction crucifixes and “pictures of Jesus,” and employ a variety of man-made “aids” to worship. Services may be led by ministers sporting clerical collars and other priestly attire. Other congregations are content to display plain crosses or additional Romish symbols at church buildings, retain Romish festival days or holy-days, include musical instruments in worship, and permit the singing of uninspired songs in worship.⁴⁴ To what degree might some of these practices be an indicator of a “less pure” church? For a serious Christian, wrestling with a question of church affiliation, a pre-eminent concern for right worship (as reflected in Calvin and the Reformed creeds) might lead them to affiliate with a church demonstrating a “more pure” regard for worship.

If the proper exercise of discipline is a mark of the church, what happens when a supposedly Reformed denomination begins to impose restrictions on its members or officers that go beyond the requirements of Scripture? Is this not an ominous abuse of church power, borrowing a characteristic of the false church that “ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God”? (*Belgic Confession*, article 32). For

⁴⁴ For The Trinity Foundation’s view of exclusive psalmody see W. Gary Crampton, “Exclusive Psalmody,” *The Trinity Review* October 1992. – Editor.

example, there have been Presbyterian denominations that required members or church officers to take a (man-made) vow of total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. Recently, Professor Engelsma’s own denomination imposed restrictions on office-bearers regarding the homeschooling of their children – an action that exhibits entirely wrong notions about ecclesiastical authority.⁴⁵ Thus we ask: At what point do the errors of a church furnish grounds for believers to avoid (or leave) such assemblies?

Professor Engelsma disclaims a “nuanced” approach in his book. To be sure, some men may use the label of “nuancing” as a cover for apostasy (Engelsma, 123ff). But a failure to deal more thoroughly with true nuances, including principles manifest in Reformation history and the creeds, seem to indicate a critical weakness in the professor’s basic paradigm. Additionally, Engelsma’s failure to deal more fully with genuine creedal and historical nuances allows him to neglect other ecclesiastical options, under the assumption (not stated directly, but certainly implied) that his denomination is the purest of them all.

The Church and Salvation

In treating the universal church, the *Belgic Confession* (article 27) states, “this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world; and yet is joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same spirit.” Next, Article 28 begins with a somewhat transitional statement: “We believe, since this holy congregation is an assemblage of those who are saved, and out of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself, and to live separate from it.”

Professor Engelsma applies this passage in the *Belgic Confession* to the *church institute* and waxes fervently:

[T]he article states that “all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves

⁴⁵ For a summary regarding the homeschooling decision of the PRCA Synod, along with the convoluted rationale used to justify this decision, see *The Standard Bearer* magazine, Volume 86, Number 1 (October 1, 2009), 5-7 and Volume 86, Number 2 (October 15, 2009), 28-30. The decision of the synod (along with formal protests that contain superior reasoning to the decision of the synod) is published in the *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2009*.

with it.” One reason is that “out of it there is no salvation.”

...This is how important church membership is. The ground for this statement in the *Belgic Confession* is that the means of grace and salvation have been given by Christ to the instituted congregation and are enjoyed only by members within the church. Christ, the living, life-giving Christ, is in the church as the savior. As there was salvation only in the ark, so there is salvation only in the instituted church. [4]

These comments are likely to cause great misunderstanding. Given such bold assertions, terms need to be carefully defined, and, again, the historic context of the creeds needs to be kept in mind.

The *Scottish Confession*, chapter 16, applies exclusive language to the *universal* church: that is, “the elect of all ages, all realms, nations, and tongues, be they of the Jews, or be they of the Gentiles; who have communion and society with God the Father, and with his Son Christ Jesus, through the sanctification of his Holy Spirit...” This body is called the communion of the saints, “who, as citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, have the fruition of the most inestimable benefits: to wit, of one God, one Lord Jesus, one faith, and of one baptism; *out of the which kirk there is neither life, nor eternal felicity*” (emphasis added). The *Confession* then adds the following statement, asserting unmistakably that no one is saved who is outside of Christ, and thus outside the *church of the elect* (that is, the *invisible* church):

[T]herefore we utterly abhor the blasphemy of them that affirm that men which live according to equity and justice shall be saved, what religion that ever they have professed. For as without Christ Jesus there is neither life nor salvation, so shall there none be participant thereof, but such as the Father has given unto his Son Christ Jesus, and those [that] in time come unto him, avow his doctrine, and believe into him (we comprehend the children with the faithful parents). This kirk is invisible, known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen, and comprehends as well (as said is) the elect that are departed (commonly called the kirk triumphant), as those that yet live and fight against sin and Satan as shall live hereafter.

Nicolaas H. Gootjes traces the language used in the *Belgic Confession* (article 28) to a modification of the language previously employed in the *French Confession*. Gootjes notes: “This article is an expanded version of article 26 of the *Gallican Confession*. The similarity can be seen, for example in the striking expression, ‘the yoke of Christ,’ which occurs in both confessions. At the beginning of the article, however, an expression is used that did not occur in the *Gallican Confession* but was probably occasioned by Beza’s confession.”

Gootjes then cites the following statement from Beza’s confession: “Finally, we must necessarily confess, since outside of Jesus Christ there is no salvation at all, that anyone who dies without being a member of this assembly is excluded from Jesus Christ and from salvation, for the power to save which is in Jesus Christ belongs only to those who recognize him as their God and Saviour (V, 1).”

Gootjes concludes that the wording of the *Belgic Confession* is an elliptical construction based on both Beza and the church fathers: “Since Beza used the expression that there is no salvation ‘outside of Christ’ in a statement on the church, he had to include involved reasoning to make the connection with the church again. The *Belgic Confession* avoided this problem by using the traditional expression ‘outside the church no salvation,’ which can already be found in the writings of Cyprian and Augustine. It is probably de Bres’ familiarity with the church fathers that allowed him to use the original expression for his confession.”⁴⁶

Beza’s confession expresses essentially the same doctrine found in the *Scottish Confession*, that outside of Christ there is no salvation, and thus only the elect (the members of Christ’s universal, invisible church) are saved. If Gootjes is correct, that the *Belgic Confession* alludes to the church fathers, then the *Confession* certainly uses the patristic language in a manner distinct from the Romanists whom the Reformers were opposing. From the language of Cyprian, the papists had developed their doctrine that *outside the institutional Roman Church there is no salvation*. Of course, the *Belgic Confession* gives no quarter to such Romish notions, having classified the Roman church as the false church.

We should recall that it was Cyprian who likened the church (embodied in her bishops) to the ark of Noah, asserting that outside the church there is no salvation. “The difference at this point be-

⁴⁶ Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources*, 85.

tween Cyprian and earlier Christians was not that he asserted that no one could be saved apart from the church, for upon this there was general agreement from primitive days, but that he identified the church with a particular institution, the Catholic church, which was founded upon and had its existence in those bishops who held their office in regular succession from the Apostles. This church alone, he claimed, was in possession of saving grace and apart from it there was no salvation.⁴⁷

Professor Engelsma takes up the ark analogy on page 4 of his book and applies it to “the instituted church.” Now, we trust that Professor Engelsma does not believe in apostolic succession. Nevertheless, his designation of the ark as a representation of the church institute smacks of a Cyprianic error, in contrast to general Reformed ecclesiology which speaks in *absolute* terms only of the invisible, universal church.

Cyprian’s principal error was based upon a confounding of the visible church with the invisible, and that led to the fundamental errors of Romish ecclesiology.⁴⁸ Professor Engelsma’s confusion on this matter is similarly apparent because, immediately after using the ark analogy on page 4, he is forced to qualify it on page 5, when he states: “I understand the *Belgic Confession*, which only echoes the teaching of the early church, to teach that there is no salvation outside the institute *ordinarily*. God himself may prevent membership, at least active membership, if, for example, by his mysterious providence he has one of his own wickedly confined to a dungeon or prison by the foes of his saints.”

This qualification (a happy inconsistency on the Professor’s part) negates the ark analogy for the instituted church, for at the time of Noah, there were only two places – inside or outside of the ark. The professor’s reasoning cannot be sound, so long as he puts the church institute into the place of the invisible church. Moreover, if the *Belgic Confession* bears the construction Professor Engelsma

places on it, then the *Belgic Confession* stands in contrast or contradiction to other Reformed creeds, which speak in absolute terms only with respect to the church of the elect.

What really seems to be troubling the professor here is the modern tendency to denigrate the role of the true (visible) church, which does indeed have a vital role in bringing salvation to mankind. After all, unto the church are committed the “oracles of God” in the Word. The Gospel is generally brought to men through the agency of the reading and preaching of the Word. “How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?” (*Romans* 10:14-15). As the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 89) says: “The Spirit of God maketh the reading,⁴⁹ but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.”

The *ordinary* means of grace are found in the visible church. Thus, the *Westminster Confession* (25:2) says: “The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God,

⁴⁹ Engelsma does not give due place to the reading of the Word as an effectual means of grace. In his zeal to stress the importance of preaching, the professor creates another false dichotomy. Engelsma claims, “the Reformed faith does not consider the mere reading of Scripture by the church to be a means of grace. The pure preaching of the Word is the means of grace. Apart from this pure preaching, there is no means of grace.” It is true that a false teacher can distort the meaning of the Word, by expounding it falsely after reading it. But it is simply inaccurate to say that “the Reformed faith does not consider the reading of Scripture by the church to be a means of grace” – unless the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* is to be regarded as un-Reformed in its teaching about this subject.

Let us also note that the private reading of Scripture is a means of grace. The Reformation began, in large measure, with Luther’s rediscovery of the Gospel through the reading of the Word. Moreover, the subsequent translation of Bible into the common language(s) of the people enabled men to read the Word for themselves. Through the distribution of printed Bibles and books, the Gospel spread remarkably among the common people, as they read the Word for themselves. (For an example among the French, see Wylie, *History of Protestantism*, Volume 2, 134-135.)

⁴⁷ Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York, 1933), Volume 2, 30-31.

⁴⁸ As William Cunningham notes, “Cyprian brought out, for the first time, with anything like clearness and distinctness, the idea of a catholic church, comprehending all the true branches of the church of Christ, and bound together by a visible and external unity. This was Cyprian’s grand contribution to the progress of error and corruption in the church, and the ultimate growth of the Papacy...” *Historical Theology*, Volume 1, 169. For further reflections on this point, see Reed, *Imperious Presbyterianism*, 8- 11.

out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

It is one thing to deny the ordinary possibility of salvation outside the visible church; it is another to cast it in the absolute form, by the analogy of the ark. The fact that the professor is forced to abandon his initial analogy of the ark, and adopt language similar the *Westminster Confession* reflects an element of confusion in his thinking.

Modern Concepts of Church Membership and Denominations

When treating the subject of church membership, we should avoid reading modern concepts of church membership back into the creeds and the writings of the Reformers. In some ways, modern views of church membership are far too loose; in other respects, they may be far too entangling.

When the Reformed confessions stress the need to join the true church, they do so in the historic context of persecution. There is no way believers in the sixteenth century could be as casual about church membership as people often are today. In leaving Rome, and associating with the Protestant cause, sixteenth-century believers might be subject to persecution. For that reason, some “underground” churches apparently did not even keep written membership rolls, lest a written record fall into the hands of the authorities who were waging the persecution.

This atmosphere of persecution helps to explain Calvin’s emphasis on confession, as well as Knox’s practice of administering the sacraments among those who had left Rome and expressed their abhorrence of the Mass. The mere act of leaving Rome, to participate in Protestant worship, amounted to an outward confession that men did not generally hazard, unless their personal profession was sincere.

By contrast, in the present day, when pluralism is viewed as a national virtue, it makes little difference to most people where a man chooses to worship. Hence, there is some justice to Professor Engelsma’s complaint there is a vast difference between church *attendance* and church *membership*. The professor laments the different levels of commitment shown between people who merely attend a church, and those who actually “join.” This modern distinction was less of an issue in the sixteenth-century, where it took a much greater level of commitment – indeed, courage – for a person to formally depart from Rome and join in worship with his Protestant brethren.

The difference between attending and joining can also be clouded in our own day, when churches establish *conditions for membership* that extend beyond the Scriptural demands made to believers regarding a legitimate profession of faith. Many denominations have their own extra-Scriptural beliefs and practices – whether written, or simply *de facto* – that are imposed upon members of the church, as conditions of membership. Sadly, this is the situation in many ostensibly Reformed and Presbyterian denominations. In some cases, ordinary members are expected to take a solemn vow to submit to the authority of the church, with the nature of that submission being vaguely defined; so that the “membership vows” become a blank check for the denomination to impose views and practices upon reclaiming members on the grounds that their membership vows require a sort of unquestioning submission to the officers of the church (or submission to sweeping, extra-Biblical policies set by the denomination’s governing bodies).

The *Belgic Confession* warns against the usurpations of the false church which “ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God,” combined with persecution of those who “rebuke her for her errors.” When Protestant denominations begin to add ordinances to the Word of God, they lose the claim of legitimate authority among their members.

A detailed examination of such aspects of the nature of church membership is beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, given the importance which Professor Engelsma attaches to church membership, it would seem to be incumbent upon him to define more fully his concept of church membership. As it stands, the professor cites sixteenth-century sources to discuss the *duty* of church membership in the twenty-first century, without adequately exploring ways that the *nature* of church membership has changed in the intervening centuries. As with any theological subject, definitions are critical, so a book on church membership ought to be clearer about the *nature* and *terms* of membership.

We could make a similar observation about the term *church*. In Scripture, the term has a variety of meanings, depending on its context. The Reformed creeds recognize distinct Biblical uses of the term: the invisible church, the general visible church, local Christian assemblies. Nevertheless, there is a vast difference between the creedal use of the term *church*, and the modern concept of a *denomination*.

In the context of the Reformation, there were *true churches* and there were *false churches*. When we consider the creedal category of *erring churches* (such as the Lutherans), we are referring to separate communions that are generically designated *denominations*. Or, if we speak of different national churches during the sixteenth-century, we might say these were different *denominations*. Nevertheless, when we speak of *modern denominations*, such as differences between the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, we have entered into a view of denominations that is more fragmented and quite beyond the major divisions being treated in the creeds. Today, churches called “Reformed” (whose heritage includes the Three Forms of Unity) and “Presbyterian” (claiming the Westminster Standards) are designated by a bewildering host of acronyms (most containing “Ps” and “Rs”) to distinguish the differing denominations. Many people need a roster just to keep these denominations separate in their minds.

Now, when the Reformed creeds speak of the duty to join true churches, there is little doubt that they have in view the Reformed congregations, in their own countries, in distinction from Rome (and erring churches like the Lutherans). In that historic context, they never faced the prospect of having to sort out the distinctions between a myriad of denominations bearing the name Reformed or Presbyterian. In some ways, using the marks of a true church set forth in the creeds will eliminate many denominations, for they are not all Reformed or Presbyterian that call themselves *Reformed* or *Presbyterian*. Churches that have abandoned the Gospel or embrace obviously corrupt worship are not true churches, regardless of their denominational label. Still, any discussion about church membership needs to account more fully for differences between the *churches* of the sixteenth century and the *denominations* of the twenty-first century.

It is at this point we become wary of another strain in the professor’s writing, that members should never leave a church that bears the marks of a true church (101). Certainly a genuine Christian should never depart from a sound church, in order to join a corrupt or false congregation. Indeed that would be apostasy. Yet, given the professor’s basic paradigm we wonder if his argument might not be used to condemn faithful believers who might wish to relocate from one “true church” to a different church that is “more pure.”

Unfortunately, we have seen this phenomenon in Presbyterian churches, when people are not

permitted to leave a church peacefully. A family may have developed issues of conscience regarding practices of worship, or they may have become convinced that the spiritual edification of their family would be better served in a different congregation. When they seek affiliation elsewhere, their existing church refuses to release their “membership,” charging them with violation of their membership vows. The argument is based on a notion that, once a person joins a true church (in this case “church” is equated with *denomination*), it is a sin to leave it, unless the denomination becomes hopelessly apostate. Such an outlook is rooted more in mean *sectarianism*, than the true catholicity of the church, as espoused in the Reformed creeds.

On another topic related to denominations, the professor asserts that “the Bible requires every local congregation to be part of a denomination of sound churches. If there are no other true, faithful congregations in the nation, the congregation ought to seek close affiliation with a denomination in another land” (117). Certainly we do not espouse independency, and would encourage congregations to foster fraternal relations with other sound churches abroad, but we are curious what the professor means when he says that isolated congregations “ought to seek close affiliation with a denomination in another land.” If he holds that a local congregation should come under the jurisdiction of a foreign denomination, then we expressly reject the notion. Likewise, we reject the practice, sometimes found among Presbyterians, of constructing a trans-national denomination. Such schemes are contrary to the ideals of the historic Presbyterian and Reformed churches, which held that the national assembly is the highest ordinary assembly.⁵⁰ Those denominations which advocate a trans-national government inevitably become top-heavy and bureaucratic; their structure makes it practically impossible for them to carry out the Scriptural duties respecting positive oversight of distant local churches; nor are their distant assemblies accessible, should members have need of making appeal to a higher assembly.

Concluding Reflections

Finally, a discussion of church membership issues needs to retain the pastoral focus of the Reformers and the Reformed creeds. We mentioned the pastoral cast of the Reformed creeds. Church affiliation is of utmost importance unto the glory of God,

⁵⁰ See *Scottish Second Book of Discipline*, chapter 7, sections 2 and 25; and *Dordt Church Order*, article 29.

and for the souls of the members. This is not a mere academic discussion. If people make bad choices, it is to the harm of their souls. They need to make right choices for the spiritual good of their families (as well as for the glory of God).

If Engelsma's exhortations are intended to stir contemporary readers out of contented membership in corrupt churches, then his main point is well made. But if the book is used to brow-beat persons into submission to the Protestant Reformed Church's extra-Scriptural impositions in worship and family life, then the author has missed a pre-eminent emphasis of the Reformers, the Reformation creeds, and (most importantly) the Scriptures.

Taken as a whole, we find the book is woefully deficient from a practical, pastoral perspective. When one considers the pleas of the original correspondents to the professor, as catalogued at the beginning of the book, one senses the burden carried by people seeking pastoral guidance about what to do, when facing the tragic reality of lacking a sound church in their vicinity. Engelsma's response is to hit them over the head with a series of combative, disjointed letters harping on the duty of church membership. True, people need to have right doctrine, in order to make correct decisions. But the professor fails to provide a reliable doctrinal or pastoral road map, because his book lacks an accurate reading of Calvin, Reformation history, and the creeds. More importantly, his book does not attempt to furnish a solid Biblical foundation regarding principles of church membership, so that readers are not comforted with the assurance, that if they follow the professor's lead, they are walking in the precepts of the Lord.

Let us not forget that Rome and apostate Protestant denominations often exercise a form of discipline. It is not the mere presence of any discipline that commends a church, but discipline "uprightly ministered as God's word prescribes."⁵¹

There are also cases where the professor's paradigm may even obscure important emphases of Scripture. For example, Professor Engelsma asserts that "those who confess the Reformed religion ...are not left by the Spirit of Christ to their own resources to discover from Scripture which are the marks of the true church. Nor are they permitted to invent novel marks of the true church on their own" (95). A few pages later, the professor classifies love

as "subjective," a quality "the presence or absence of which is difficult to determine with certainty" (102). Thus, to introduce love as a factor in assessing a church seems to be applying an additional (novel?) mark, or unwarranted subjective criteria.

Now if the professor is speaking about love *falsely-defined* – such as when people regard a church's just exercise of discipline to be an unloving act – then we agree with him. But when he disclaims love as being too subjective to measure, he does great disservice to the teachings of both Christ and the apostle Paul. Do the words of our Lord have no meaning, with reference to the *visibility* of the church, when he declares, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (*John 13:35*)? Does this sound like a quality that is too subjective to determine?

Further, the apostle Paul, in *1 Corinthians 13*, undertakes a discussion of love in his exposition regarding the right use of spiritual gifts. He states clearly that, without love, the gifts are being exercised in a useless or harmful manner (verses 1-3). A church that is largely devoid of love has defaced the marks of the church just as surely as a church that confessionally professes true doctrine, while tolerating preachers of contrary doctrine in its midst. In both cases, there is a contradiction between the collective *profession* and *practice* that abandons the right exercise of discipline. If the officers of the church (those claiming spiritual gifts, noted by the apostle Paul) consistently exercise their duties in a harsh and unloving manner, without a genuine effort to encourage the weak and reclaim offenders, they are not exercising discipline properly (the "third mark" of the church), although they may profess it in their public standards. They have defaced the mark of discipline.

It is regrettable that such crucial subjects are often debated without an adequate exposition of Scripture. We have addressed the subject of the church from a largely historical standpoint, because that is the ground staked out in Engelsma's book, and because the Reformed creeds (also a central part of this discussion) cannot be understood apart from their historic context. Nevertheless, the present author wishes to emphasize that the issues before us evoke basic concepts set forth in the Scriptures. Critical Biblical principles include:

1. The Gospel is an exclusive message of sovereign grace. (This is one principle where Engelsma is generally correct.) There is really no other Gospel: "If any man preach any other gospel

⁵¹ SC, chapter 18; see the BC, article 29, wherein the mark of discipline is followed with the qualification, "in short, if all things are managed according to the pure word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected...."

unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (*Galatians* 1:9). It is the Word of God which brings life to Christians, "being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (*1 Peter* 1:23). The church itself is called "the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (*1 Timothy* 3:15); and therefore any assembly that does not maintain and defend the Gospel cannot be classified as a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the earliest Protestant creeds opens with this declaration: "The holy Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger."⁵² Sincere Christians should avoid connections with any assembly that corrupts the Gospel.

2. Christians are commanded to abstain from idolatry. This duty ought to be obvious from the first two commandments in the Decalogue. Kindred apostolic admonitions make it clear: "Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry" (*1 Corinthians* 10:14). "What agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty" (*2 Corinthians* 6:16-18). Separation from idolatry requires converted Christians to sever any previous connections with Rome, and to remain apart from other assemblies given to superstitions, corruption of the sacraments, or promoting man-made forms of worship.

3. For a professing Christian to live in willful seclusion from the true church is contrary to the express teaching of Scripture, which represents each member of the body as a mere part of the body in need of the whole. "Now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary...." (*1 Corinthians* 12:20-22). Sincere believers should join a sound Christian congregation – a church which exhibits the qualities stressed in the Scriptures, as illustra-

ted in Reformed creeds. If there is no sound church in their vicinity, they should work to establish one; or they may also consider the option to relocate to a place where there is a sound congregation.

These teachings from the Bible, and related doctrines, should inform any Christian's decision about church membership. It is not merely a matter of what the creeds say, or what precedents we find from history (as illustrative as those things may be); it is really a matter of basic faithfulness in our profession of the Christian faith.

APPENDIX

The "English" Problem

There is another facet of Reformation history that is relevant to a discussion of church membership: the unique features of English ecclesiastical history. Professor Engelsma's book, *Bound to Join*, is based upon letters he originally addressed to a largely British audience who sought his counsel regarding ecclesiastical questions. The English Reformation was seriously defective, and the deficiencies of the English Reformation cast a long shadow on English ecclesiastical matters even to the present day. Therefore, it is relevant to note some of the peculiarities of the English Reformation.

From the outset, the English Reformation was problematic. The ignoble motives of Henry VIII, in his break with Rome, meant that the English Church was not initially reformed with respect to either the Gospel or worship – the very issues which were at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. Moreover, Henry's opposition to "Lutheranism" in general (for which the pope gave him the title "Defender of the Faith"), and his role in the death of Tyndale, demonstrated hostility to fundamental reform of the English church. Nevertheless, England's separation from the papacy did provide the opportunity for more positive developments after Henry died.

Henry's son and successor, Edward VI, was but a youth. Even so, Edward embraced Protestant views respecting the Gospel. Edward provided support for Protestant preachers throughout England, as well as a refuge for European Protestants who fled to England to avoid persecution on the Continent, in lands where popish rulers held power.

⁵² *Ten Theses of Berne* (1528), cited from Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (revised by David Schaff; 1884, 1931; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), Volume 1, 364-66; Volume III, 208-10.

Unfortunately, Edward was surrounded by political and ecclesiastical leaders who did not embrace Reformed teachings on worship, and the king's advisors saw the national church in largely political terms, with respect to its membership. As a result, the English Reformation never developed much further and, upon the death of Edward, suffered a severe reversal with the accession of Bloody Mary.

John Knox was a court preacher during the reign of Edward. The Scottish preacher had success in combating Romish doctrine in the north of England (near his Scottish homeland),⁵³ and Knox engaged in vigorous attempts to reform the English prayer book.⁵⁴ In one telling episode during his service in England, Knox declined the offer of a regular position as an English minister. When pressed to explain his refusal to accept the post, Knox replied "that unless many things were reformed, no minister could discharge his office before God in England, for no minister in England had the authority to divide and separate the lepers from the whole, which was a chief point of his office."⁵⁵ In other words, Knox perceived it as a fundamental defect that the English church had no proper application of discipline. Although Knox considered himself at liberty to preach the Gospel throughout the realm, as a fulfillment of his ministerial calling, he could not, in good conscience, countenance an ecclesiastical system that utterly lacked proper discipline.

Edward died after only a brief reign, and was followed by Bloody Mary, who lit the fires of persecution. Many Protestants were burnt at the stake, and others fled to the Continent, in order to escape persecution. An assembly of English Protestants settled in Frankfurt, and called Knox to be one of their pastors. This congregation subsequently be-

came embroiled in a bitter controversy over worship, because some members wanted to use the English prayer book, whereas others (including Knox) considered the English liturgy to be insufficiently reformed. An influx of new refugees tipped the numerical balance of power within the congregation in favor of the liturgical party, who promptly utilized political ploys to get rid of Knox, and impose the liturgy on the church. At that point, after attempts at reconciliation, a major portion of the reforming party left Frankfort and took up residence in Geneva, where they organized a new congregation.⁵⁶ The newly-constituted English congregation then called John Knox and Christopher Goodman to serve as co-pastors.

The English Congregation at Geneva was a self-organized, self-governing church. Certainly the congregation enjoyed the counsel of Calvin and other ministers in Geneva, but the English church was not organically ruled by the local ecclesiastical authorities, as language barriers were apparently treated as a sufficient reason for a separate ecclesiastical government.⁵⁷ The English Congregation at Geneva produced its own Confession of Faith (1556), a book of ecclesiastical order, and a complete translation of the Bible (first published in 1560).

The English congregation at Geneva was industrious, but it was not the only assembly of English exiles. There were other English refugee congregations scattered throughout the Continent. Some of these other congregations were super-

⁵³ See Knox's *Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry* (1550) in *Selected Writings of John Knox*, 19-64; also in the Laing edition of Knox's *Works*, Volume 3, 29-70.

⁵⁴ See chapter 5 of W. Stanford Reid, *Trumpeter of God*, 70-104; Peter Lorimer, *John Knox and the Church of England: His Work in Her Pulpit and His Influence Upon Her Liturgy, Articles, and Parties* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1875).

⁵⁵ David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland* (Thomas Thomson, ed.; Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1842), Volume 1, 280-81. Also, Knox consistently maintained opposition to the Anglican practice of receiving the communion in a kneeling posture, a usage which smacked of the Romish tendency to adore the elements in the Mass.

⁵⁶ The conflict in Frankfort was a precursor of conflicts later manifest between the Puritans and the Anglicans; disputes regarding worship and church order were interwoven within the subsequent English Civil War, and they are reflected in the formulation of the Westminster Standards. For a general account of the conflict, see the following narrative: *A Brief Discourse of the Troubles Begun at Frankfort in Germany, Anno Domini 1554. About the Book of Common Prayer and Ceremonies, and Continued by the Englishmen There, to the end of Queen Mary's Reign: in Which Discourse the Gentle Reader Shall See the Very Original and Beginning of All the Contention that has been and What was the Cause of the Same* (1574, and various reprint editions). The work was first published anonymously.

⁵⁷ This principle was true of refugee congregations throughout Europe, as well as previously in England during the reign of Edward. Congregations of foreign refugees were granted general approval by the local magistrates to share meeting houses or other public facilities. But the foreign congregations were left to govern themselves without significant interference.

vised by English prelates-in-waiting, who were hoping to regain control of the English church after the reign of Mary.

When Bloody Mary died, Elizabeth took the throne, and most Englishmen returned from the Continent to their homeland. Ecclesiastics of various persuasions began jockeying for position in the Elizabethan English Church. Because the English monarch controlled both church and state, prospects for thorough reform were soon dashed.

"[Elizabeth] was what John Calvin repeatedly and pejoratively dismissed as a 'Nicodemite'.... In the reign of Queen Mary, Elizabeth also became a Nicodemite, dissembling her undoubted evangelical sympathies and attending mass. So did her old tutor Roger Ascham. Moreover, when Elizabeth came to the throne, she modeled here new church structure with the aid of former Edwardian politicians who had done the same thing: Bacon and Cecil. Even more strikingly, her first Primate of All England, Matthew Parker, had somehow managed to survive in the England of Queen Mary without joining the exile. The same was true of her first Dean of the Chapel Royal, her Edwardian Chaplain George Carew. The Elizabethan Settlement was a Nicodemite settlement."⁵⁸

"John Knox had therefore proved prophetic in the 1555 troubles at Frankfurt in singling out the matters which fired up Protestant activists under Elizabeth. He castigated Nicodemites: her Church was led by them. He deplored the lack of discipline in the Edwardian Church: she did nothing to change the system."⁵⁹

The Elizabethan church settlement became the enduring constitution of the Church of England. Except for Puritan dominance during the mid-1600s, the established church in England has maintained Anglo-Catholic rites of worship, and failed to uphold discipline in a Biblical manner advocated by Reformed churches in other lands. In 1662, with the Act of Uniformity, ministers who would not conform to Anglican rites and ceremonies were expelled from their charges ("The Great Ejection").

Although it is presently lawful to organize "non-conformist" congregations in England today, non-conformists do not possess the favored status of the official state church. Some persons of professed "evangelical" convictions choose to remain within the Anglican communion, thus becoming a

sort of "church within a church." Others remain separate from the state-church, and they affiliate with a variety of "evangelical" churches (some joining independent assemblies, and others joining connectional denominations) Of course, in England, as in America, there is a genuine question as to whether many of the so-called *evangelical* churches are truly committed to the Gospel: that is, the genuine *Evangel* as it was championed by the Reformers and the Reformed churches.

For English Christians who embrace the true Gospel and right worship, as defended by the Reformers, there are inevitable questions regarding church affiliation. Is it lawful to remain in connection with the Anglican Church? Might they join a non-conformist assembly near their home, even if the congregation possesses significant weaknesses in doctrine or worship? Should they give up on their homeland, and move to some other country, where they might find a better church? These are the kinds of questions that vexed the souls of the English believers in communication with Professor Engelsma. Such inquiries apparently led Professor Engelsma to the ruminations published in his book, *Bound to Join*.⁶⁰

Book Offer

Get both *Imperious Presbyterianism* by Kevin Reed (\$5.95) and *Come Out From Among Them: "Anti-Nicodemite" Writings of John Calvin* (\$29.95) referenced in this article – and a project for which Kevin Reed served as editor and publisher – for \$25 postage paid to addresses in the United States and \$33 postage paid to foreign addresses. Please send orders to The Trinity Foundation, Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692, or call us at 423.743.0199 to pay by credit card. Quantities are limited, and offer expires August 1, 2011.

⁵⁸ Diarmaid MacCullough, *The Boy King: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 189.

⁵⁹ MacCullough, *The Boy King*, 195.

⁶⁰ For a specific list of queries proposed to Professor Engelsma, see his own account on pages xiii-xv of *Bound to Join*.