Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

definitions are very helpful things. I know that a number of you recently sat school or uni Exams, and we are often asked to provide definitions in exams because they help teachers see that we understand the concepts or the things that they have been teaching us about.

But definitions can also be incredibly comforting. For example, **the definition of flight** is enough lift + enough thrust = takeoff. And that is extremely comforting when your plane is hurtling down the runway and you know that there is only so much runway!

But on a far more serious note, the definition of the church is incredibly comforting for believers. I have a book in my library that is about the church and it is called ‘*The Glorious Body of Christ*.’ But in the opening remarks of the book, the author freely acknowledges that the church that we see is often far from glorious.

* There is persecution. Give example…
* There are so many denominations
  + Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican/Reformed/Lutheran/Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal…
* And someone has said that it is bad enough that the church has splintered into many denominations, but what is worse today is that the splinters have splinters!
  + Here is a list of denominations just from the Reformed/Presbyterian family in North America Reformed – Reformed Church of America, Reformed Church in US, United Ref, Canadian Ref, Christian Ref, Heritage Ref, Orthodox Presbyterian, Reformed Presbyterian, Presbyterian Reformed, Protestant Reformed, Korean Presbyterian, Free Reformed, Netherlands Reformed, Associate Reformed Presbyterian, Bible Presbyterian, Covenant Reformed Presbyterian, Evangelical Reformed, Westminster Presbyterian…
* But we could easily also talk about our own church – Glorious? Well, there are lots of really good things going on here but there is also conflict and hurt and there are people who have left us because they were unhappy here.

So the church that we see is often far from glorious. But notice that our confession article begins with We *believe and profess*… It does not say that we *see* the church but that we *believe* and *confess* the church*.* The Belgic Confession of Faith was written in a time when those wanting to reform the church were being persecuted and martyred. Power seemed to be in the hands of the persecutors and things looked very grim for those seeking to be faithful to the Lord. So these words were written to provide comfort and encouragement for believers by setting down what the Bible teaches about the church as an antidote for what they saw all around them.

And it will always benefit believers to think about the definition of the church that we are given in the Bible. And we are going to do that today in the light of passages like the ones we have read. Our sermon theme is **The Comfort of Believing and Professing One catholic Church**. And our three points will be the **basic constitution** of the church, the **universal distribution** of the church, and the **promised preservation** of the church.

1. So we begin with the **Basic Constitution** of the church.
   1. During the week several newsworthy criminal trials ended with various decisions about guilt or innocence and conviction. And I was listening to a talkback host who used to be a lawyer and one caller asked him for the legal definition of conviction. And the talkback host laughed and said though he had used the term 1000s of times he had never actually thought about what it means. So then he attempted to define conviction. Well, we typically use the word ‘church’ lots, don’t we. Sometimes we are speaking about the building and sometimes we are referring to our or another congregation. But what is the basic constitution of the church? What is the essence of the church? And of course, since the church is of God’s design, our question really is what does the Bible say that the church is? Our confession article says that the church is a “holy congregation and assembly of true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.” But is this what the Bible teaches?
      1. Well, a good place for us to start is our earlier reading from **Romans 10:9-13**. There we read, “*If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved … For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*” So what we see here is that our most basic need as human beings is to be saved. The Bible explains that we are all guilty law-breakers, which makes us deserving of death and eternal condemnation. And our only hope is to become a saved one, who is a person that calls on the name of Jesus, which means that he or she confesses Him as their Lord and believes that God raised Him from the dead.
      2. And just in case anyone is tempted to argue that maybe Jesus is just one way to be saved, among many others, **Acts 4:12** says this about Jesus, “*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*.” So the saved are not those who call on Jesus *and* Buddhists *and* Hindus *and* Muslims *and* anyone who claims to be spiritual; the saved are *only* those who call on the name of Jesus.
      3. So most basically, the church is all of the saved ones – all those who call on the name of Jesus. And this is the message also of **John 10**. There Jesus said, “*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me … So there [is] one flock, one shepherd*.” So the church is those who find their salvation in Jesus Christ. So, so far, so good, with the definition of our confession article!
      4. And the name that is usually given to those who are part of the church of Jesus Christ is ‘**Christians**.’ And I say given because in **Acts 11:26** we read, “*And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians*.” So they didn’t call themselves Christians, they were called Christians by others.
         1. In those times, if you were politically aligned with King Herod, you would always be talking about Herod and how good Herod was for law and order, etc. And so you would be called a **Herodian**.
         2. And if you were religiously aligned with a Rabbi called David, for example, you would always be talking about David’s view on this and David’s view on that. And so you would be called a **Davidian**.
         3. So you can guess why the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. It is because they were always talking about Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was their everything! They wanted everyone they met to know about Jesus Christ.
         4. And just as an aside, it is worth reflecting on what people would call you based on what or who you are always talking about? Could it be that there are people who have known you for sometime who would be surprised to learn that you are a follower of Jesus?
      5. But the main point here is that all this is why our confession article says that the church is a “holy congregation and assembly of true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ.”
   2. And brothers and sisters, young people and boys and girls, that is a beautiful truth for us to meditate on. **What a privilege and honour** **it is** **to be a member of the glorious body of Christ**! There is nothing that can even begin to compare with the goodness of knowing that you are a sheep in the flock of Christ. Whether you are in this building on Sunday or at home or work or school during the week, every day, for you, is a day in the holy congregation of those who find salvation and life and meaning and hope and purpose and joy in Jesus Christ.
      1. And the Bible is clear that while we have a responsibility to choose to believe in Jesus, it is actually God who saves us; who graciously brings us into the church. So this is an **undeserved** privilege!
      2. And if you are not yet in this holy congregation, I urge you to call on Jesus as your Lord and Saviour today; believe that God raised Him from the dead and come ‘inside’ and join us!
2. So the basic constitution of the church is that it is all those who truly call on the name of the Lord Jesus. But that presses us on to the next thing that we need to consider about the Bible’s definition of the church, which is the **Universal Distribution** of the Church.
   1. Our confession talks about “one catholic or universal church.” And most of you will have heard before that Catholic with a capital ‘C’ refers to the Roman Catholic Church, while catholic with a lower-case ‘c’ just means universal. And the church as a universal church has two dimensions to it:
      1. The first dimension is the dimension of **History**. The second paragraph of our confession article says, “The church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end.”
         1. B&G, who was the **first member** of the church of Jesus Christ? **Adam**. And to Adam and Eve were born Cain and Abel and other children. And we know from the story of Cain and Abel that Abel was a member of the church of Jesus Christ, because we are told that the Lord accepted Abel’s offering. And then, after Cain killed Abel, we read, “*And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, "God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him." To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD*.” So in the earliest years and decades and centuries of human existence, there were those who called on the name of the Lord; who were members of the church of Jesus Christ.
         2. And then we fast forward to Abraham and our earlier reading from **Genesis 22:18**. God said to Abraham, “*I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed*.” So **Abraham** was a member of the church of Jesus Christ. And from Abraham came the **Jewish people**. And the OT is about the Jews as the OT assembly of the church of Jesus Christ. All of the Jews who looked forward in faith to Messiah were a part of the one church of Christ.
         3. But God was also telling Abraham that through one of His descendants all of the nations of the earth would be blessed. And that is what the NT is about. In **John 10** Jesus spoke about His sheep and having sheep in another fold who He would bring together as one flock. And He was talking about bringing Jew and Gentile or Non-Jew together as the NT church. **Romans 10:12** says, “*For there is no distinction between Jew and [Non-Jew]; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him*.”
         4. And so, the One catholic or universal church is made up all those who looked forward in faith to the promised Messiah since Adam and all who *have* and who *do* and who *will* look back in faith to Jesus Christ until He comes again.
   2. But the second dimension of the church as a universal church is the dimension of **Geography**; not only does the church look backward and forwards in time, it also looks outward across the world. The third paragraph of our confession article begins, “Moreover, this holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.”
      1. When Jesus was commissioning His disciples to their work as His apostles, He said, “*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*.” And in the back half of our Bibles we have letters to the believers in Rome, Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Colossae, and Ephesus, and to believers who had been dispersed into even further off countries.
      2. And in terms of today, I referenced these statistics a couple of weeks ago but according to **Wycliffe Bible translators**, the whole Bible has been translated into 698 languages, the NT into 1548 languages, and portions of the Bible into 1138 languages. Now, there are 7353 languages in the world and there are 7.7 billion people in the world. And while that sounds like most people must not have a Bible they can read, you need to remember that many people speak two or more languages. So the 698 languages that the whole Bible has been translated into means that 5.6 billion of the world’s 7.7 billion people can read the whole Bible, even if it is not in their ‘mother tongue.’ And a further 1.3 billion can read the NT or portions of the Bible. So 6.9 billion people can read all or some of the Bible. So the one church of Christ truly is a worldwide church.
      3. And we saw this a couple of weeks ago when we listened to **Rev. Frank Van Dalen** who is a minister in Lithuania. We begin our services by saying, “*Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth*,” which is from Psalm 121:2, and he told us how his congregation uses those same words, in Lithuanian, to begin their service. And that is why it is always such a blessing to hear from missionaries!
      4. But some of us will have worshipped in other countries ourselves and we will know that Jesus Christ has His people all over the globe. And it is such a joy to know that we are among Christ’s people in different places all around the world!
3. So the church truly is universal; it goes back into history and it goes forward into the future and it is all around the world. But to see how the Bible’s definition of the church as one catholic Church is a powerful comfort for believers, we must end with our third point, which is the **promised Preservation** of the Church. Our confession says that “this holy church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man.” And here I invite you to turn again to **Revelation 12**.
   1. This chapter is worthy of its own sermon or even several sermons, but its basic message is exactly what our confession article describes. We read in v1 about a woman and in v2 we read that she was pregnant and about to give birth. But then we are introduced to the great red dragon who stood in front of the woman to devour the child when it was born, but her child was “*caught up by God and to His throne*.” And then we are told that “*the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1260 days*.”
      1. Well, the woman there is OT Israel. It is from her that the Lord Jesus was born as a son of Israel. And the dragon is the devil who tried to kill Jesus not long after His public ministry began. But we know that Jesus came to die to save His people from their sins. So His death was not His defeat but His victory. And so He rose and ascended to heaven where He lives and reigns now.
   2. And then we read in vv7-12 about Michael and the angels of heaven fighting against the dragon and his angels/demons, and the dragon was defeated and thrown down to the earth, together with his angels. And in v13 we read that the dragon pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child but she was given eagle’s wings to fly to the wilderness where she was nourishedfor what is now described as“*a time, times, and half a time*.” And in v17, we read, “*Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea*.”
      1. So now the woman is not just OT Israel, from whom came the Lord Jesus, but also the NT church of Jesus. She really is the personification of everything we have talked about today – the “one catholic or universal church, which is a congregation and assembly of true Christian believers.”
   3. And the chief comfort from this passage is **how it accurately reflects how we see the church on earth**. We live in the time described in vv14-17 where the Lord is nourishing the church. We have access to the Bible, which we shall say more about in a moment, and the Lord continues to raise up preachers who open up the wonderful truthes of God’s world for His people. But at the same time the great dragon, who is the devil, is making war on the church.
      1. We see it in denominationalism. The fact that there are so many denominations is because of the work of the devil.
      2. We see it also with persecution. This too is the devil at work.
      3. We see it also with heresy, which is the teaching of false doctrine. This too is the devil at work.
      4. And today we see it also with distraction. We are so busy with our hobbies and with Netflix that we just don’t have time for spiritual disciplines. And this too is the devil at work.
   4. But do you remember what Jesus said to Peter after Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ? He said, “*On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*.” And although Revelation 12 ends with the dragon making war on the church, that is **not the Bible’s last word about the church**! Revelation ends with a Rider on a horse who comes down from heaven. And the name of the Rider is the Word of God, and on His robe and thigh is written, King of kings and Lord of lords. And the dragon is captured and thrown into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And then we read about the church described as “*the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*.”

In terms of definitions, theologians speak of the church militant and the church triumphant. Militant means in a battle. And today, we are part of the church militant. But the Lord of the church is Jesus Christ. He will preserve His church! And when he returns, His church will be the triumphant church of heaven.

And this is why the Apostle Paul said this in **Philippians 3:20**-21, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body.” The church truly is the glorious body of Christ. So ***be a member*** of His church, ***pray*** for His church, and look forward to the day when the battle will be over. Amen.