

Public Profession of Faith

In a few weeks, God willing, we will celebrate public Profession of Faith. A number of people have been taking the Profession of Faith class and most, if not all, will be standing before the congregation and they will be professing their faith. Profession of Faith is celebrated as an important step in the faith journey of baptized members of our congregation.

But what is Profession of Faith, and where does it come from? A formal profession of faith before the congregation is not commanded by Scripture, nor do we see any examples of professions of faith in the Bible itself. The closest biblical references we have to professions of faith are the adult baptisms of those who had not grown up in the church but had come to faith in Jesus Christ when they heard the gospel preached. The Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8 is one such example of someone who came to faith in Jesus Christ and, upon his profession, was baptized by Philip. In churches where infants are not baptized, adult baptism takes the place of profession of faith. In churches which do baptize infants, profession of faith, or something similar, has become standard practice.

As is often the case with the practices of Protestant churches such as the CRC, much of what we do has its roots in the older church which gave rise to ours, the church we now call the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the European church which was centred in Rome had seven sacraments, baptism and confirmation among them. Confirmation arises out of baptism.

Roman Catholics teach that it is nearly impossible for someone to be saved if they are not baptized. Their logic is as follows: to be saved, one must believe the gospel, namely that Jesus died to forgive us our sins. The church has been entrusted with the message of the gospel and calls people to believe. Baptism is the means by which one enters the church and so can hear the gospel. Thus, we have this progression: baptism gives one entry into the church where the gospel is preached and it is through the preaching of the gospel that one comes to faith and so are saved. Thus, Roman Catholics would say that without baptism there cannot be salvation. Baptism is a gracious act God administered by the church by which it is conferred upon the individual the ability to hear the gospel and so believe.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, confirmation, also a sacrament in the RCC, follows naturally upon baptism. As the church, with the help of the parents, teaches baptized children to put their trust in Jesus, it is expected that the children will come to faith. When that child (who must be at least 7 years old) is able to say that he/she is ready to renounce the world and follow Jesus, believing that his death on the cross is God's gracious act of salvation, that child is confirmed. In the ceremony the bishop (very occasionally the local priest), after hearing a profession of faith, confirms that the one before him has been granted eternal life and then confers upon that person the gifts of the Holy Spirit. According to the liturgy of confirmation, the Holy Spirit is given to the individual to be their Helper and Guide so that they can live with wisdom, courage, and reverence.

To summarize, in the RCC at baptism the church confers upon a child the ability and opportunity to believe and at confirmation, the church confers upon the ones who believe the ability to live their lives as faithful

followers of Jesus Christ. Both baptism and confirmation, thus, are acts of the church through which God graciously brings his people to faith and faithfulness.

There is much that is right and good in the Roman Catholic teaching, but the Reformers did not agree with these teachings entirely. We who adhere to the teachings of the Reformers (Calvin, in particular) understand things a little differently.

First, baptism is not a means by which God brings us into his church. Rather, to use the language of both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession, through baptism we are received into Christ's church, meaning that the church recognizes and welcomes the person being baptized as being part of God's church either through faith in Jesus Christ or because they are born into a family of believers for, as Paul says, children of believers are holy. Thus, baptism recognizes what God has already done. It is God who confers upon individuals a place in his church, and the church recognizes what God has done. While the Roman Catholic teaching says that it is the church which has been given the right to confer upon a person the ability and opportunity to be saved, Reformation churches attribute this work to God.

Like the RCC, Reformation churches teach that we all need to believe in Jesus to be saved. When a person comes to faith (be they young or old), they are affirming and accepting that not only has Jesus died for sinners, but he has also died for "me" as a sinner. In other words, as we grow older, we are all required to believe in Jesus in order to be saved. We also believe that at the moment one becomes part of God's family, the Holy Spirit is already living in them, giving them the ability to live faithfully. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to all God's covenant children, young and old, and they do not need to be conferred upon an individual by the church. Again, while the RCC sees itself as being called to confer upon the believer God's gracious gifts, the Reformation churches teach that it is God who acts directly in the lives of people, without the necessity of the medial role of the church. Thus, instead of practicing confirmation which is an act of the church, Reformation churches have adopted the practice of Profession of Faith.

In Profession of Faith an individual is given the opportunity to express publicly that they affirm and accept God's gracious promises made to them in baptism. Profession of Faith is an opportunity to testify to what has already happened and should not be viewed as a life-changing experience. Profession of Faith is simply a public announcement that "This is what God has done in my life through Jesus Christ." Further, it is an opportunity for an individual to say, "And I am publicly announcing that with the help of the Holy Spirit, I will live for Jesus." And, importantly, in Profession of Faith, those professing their faith also make a formal commitment to the church to which they already belong, asking that the church hold them accountable in life and faith.

Reformation churches have abandoned the rite of confirmation and have, instead, adopted the practice of public Profession of Faith. We have also abandoned the idea that something "happens" to the individual at their Profession of Faith. We don't look for a change in a person's life, but, rather, we celebrate the change that has already taken place. When we hear the profession of God's children, we should be filled with a spirit of wonder and awe that God has again been faithful to fulfill his promises. The Faith Formation Committee of the CRC has said that perhaps one public Profession of Faith is not enough. The committee suggests that our professions should happen often and regularly. But perhaps they already do, as we profess our faith using the words of the Apostles' Creed. Should we not be filled with a spirit of wonder and awe when we again testify that our Triune God has saved us into the covenant community.

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