

THE INVISIBLE CHURCH VIEW

A Barrier to True Unity

In the editorial "Church Unity: Shades of Gray?" (a), we examined Dr. T. Plantinga's assertion that (some) Canadian Reformed people "operating on black and white thinking" suppose that they are "the only true church in town." (b) We said that this assertion is in fact a caricature. Furthermore, we noted that this perplexing and disturbing caricature became the basis for his suggestion that we abandon our black and white thinking about "the true church." This destructive caricature became the impetus for the inference that we curb the use of our confessional language of "true" and "false" church (BC Art. 29). Dr. Plantinga made his rather pernicious assertion in the context of discussions about unity and "the challenge of church union." He expresses the opinion that "if the doctrine of 'the true church' is subordinated to the Biblical emphasis on the unity of the church, things begin to fall into place."

We observed that Dr. Plantinga's affinity for churches that are subject to "mixture and error" and the "more or less pure" forms of the church of Christ, illustrates the validity of J. F. MacArthur's concern about a lack of discernment in our thinking about truth. "Discernment," says MacArthur, "is black and white thinking - the conscious refusal to color every issue in shades of gray." Yet, as MacArthur stated, it has become quite popular among Christians to assert that almost nothing is black and white. Virtually all issues of right and wrong, true and false, good and bad, are painted in shades of gray." (c)

In a recent issue of Clarion we read that "some have the impression that we as Canadian Reformed people are not united in our view of the church." (d) The validity of this impression is confirmed by the fact that also among those who lay claim to being Reformed there remains evidence of painting in "shades of gray." Article 29 of our confession about a true and false church is nullified because of all kinds of conceptual distinctions such as: visible/invisible, militant/triumphant, institute/organism, universal/local, more or less pure forms of the church of Christ, and so forth. To satisfy the desire for unity, and to meet the challenge of church union, our clear Reformed confession of Scripture about the Church as the "gathering of believers" is undermined by the Protestant "American" perspective of an invisible Church consisting of the "whole number of the elect."

"The Protestant 'American' view on the church is guided by the fundamental belief that the Church of Christ is basically invisible and manifests itself in various denominations or throughout denominations, also in varying degrees of purity... It all boils down to this: all denominations have a right to exist and are significant for the whole, since pluralism and pluriformity are important characteristics of the one invisible Church. No Church may claim purity in doctrine, liturgy, and polity, although the one may be somewhat 'purer' than the other. Each makes his own attempt at serving God in the best way possible, and all are assured of their own place in the great invisible Church of Christ." (e)

In Article 25 of the Westminster Confession, we can read that the Catholic (or universal) Church is invisible, consisting of the whole number of the elect, whereas the visible Church consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion together with their children. The

Westminster Confession renders the invisible Church as “the whole number of the elect.” We should, however, be careful in approaching the matter from this angle, for it is incorrect to speak of the church as the number or sum of the elect. Our confession speaks consistently in terms of the “gathering of believers,” and a gathering is not the same as the “sum” or total of believers.

If we speak of the Church in terms of the election, we create uncertainty: Where are the elect? We do not know! The secret things are for the Lord our God. Election is God’s sovereign decree, while “gathering” speaks of Christ’s ongoing activity and revealed norms to which we are bound. If we speak about the church as “the number of the elect,” we might inadvertently come to speak of the “invisible church,” for who knows where all the elect are? If we speak about the Church - as our confession does - as the gathering of believers, we must apply the norms by which the believers are gathered, visibly at one place, under one preaching, partaking in one communion. The terminology used in the WCF gives rise to misconceptions and accommodates the American denominationalist pattern. Given the Westminster definition of the church, it is also difficult to see how the OPC can avoid the practice of pluralism or pluriformity of the church.

The OPC’s Form of Government seems to confirm this practice. There we read: “The visible unity of the Body of Christ, though not altogether destroyed, is greatly obscured by the division of the Christian church into different groups or denominations. In such denominations Christians exercise a fellowship toward each other in doctrine, worship, and order that they do not exercise towards other Christians. The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error, and some have gravely departed from the apostolic purity; yet all of these which maintain through sufficient discipline the Word and the sacraments in their fundamental integrity are to be recognized as true manifestations of the church of Jesus Christ.” (FOG, IV.4 p.14)

Such a passage embodies the notion of pluriformity. Note that the body of Christ is basically an invisible thing which manifests itself in several forms, but that all the denominations together form the one Body of Christ. Such a view cannot be squared with either Scripture or the Three Forms of Unity, but such is the announced basis of church unity with the OPC. It is not surprising, then, that the OPC allows... to the Lord’s Supper Table all “earnest Christians” even if their confession is incompatible with the confession of the OPC.

We read in *Christian Renewal* (April 25/94) that in the OPC church at Hull (Iowa), pastored by the Rev. G. I. Williamson the Lord’s Supper was celebrated by a small group of Reformed believers. We are also told that “there were almost as many different Reformed affiliations present as there were pieces of bread.” We see in this celebration of the Lord’s Supper the consequences of the Protestant “American” view of the church. In order not to deny the Supper to those who are joined to Christ and to His church visible, the Supper is offered to all visitors of evangelical churches who may belong to Christ’s invisible church.

“The weakness in the Westminster Standards and the resulting prominence of the concept of the invisible church... leads churches who hold to these Standards to have difficulty understanding why we hold to a closed table when we participate in the signs and seals of the covenant. We should be sensitive to this difficulty, and have patience with their labeling this as exclusivism, but we may not, in eagerness to come to unity give up our doctrine of the covenant and the church in order to accommodate others. That would mean the loss of much of the comforting Scriptural truth that has

cost so much in our history to discover and to maintain. We need to sound forth that truth - boldly and clearly and consistently. For there are those who realize that there is a problem and who are searching.” (f)

The Belgic Confession certainly speaks about the “catholic or universal” church, but it nowhere speaks of an “invisible church.” The fact that we can’t see something, or see it in its entirety, does not mean that it is therefore invisible. The church is never invisible, but to us, essentially “unoverseeable”. In his article “Denominationalism,” Rev. Cl. Stam summarized it in this way: “This Church is being gathered from the beginning to the end of the world (Article 27) - therefore essentially unoverseeable to us, limited humans - also spread over the whole world - therefore, again, to us unoverseeable - yet always visible, even ‘though sometimes for a while it appears very small.’ This Church is visible as a ‘communion of saints’ (Article 28), in which all are called to participate fully, and it is known by clear marks (Article 29), so that it can be easily distinguished from ‘all sects which assume to themselves the name of the Church.’” (g) It should then be clear that “our Confession nowhere speaks of an ‘invisible Church,’ but of the Church which God visibly gathers from out of all times and places, according to His divine pleasure and council, and which is found according to the marks set in His revelation. To partake in this catholic gathering of believers, one must be enjoined to that Church which unequivocally displays the marks... The late Rev. I. de Wolf has argued correctly that it belongs to the beauty of our confession that it does not speak in systematic terms of the church as “visible/invisible,” or “institution/organism,” or general/local, but in a simple Biblical fashion.” (h)

In the Clarion article referred to earlier, it was pointed out that “some have the impression that we as Canadian Reformed people are not united in our view of the church,” and it was suggested that “this certainly does not help in presenting a clear picture of the standpoint of the Canadian Reformed Churches.” We might add that it certainly does not help us to help those “who are searching.” For their sake, and also for our own, let us therefore in a united confession of the truth, truly confess what we believe, and also wholeheartedly believe what we confess, for only then can we “sound forth the truth - boldly and clearly and consistently.” On the basis of our Reformed confession of Scripture about the Church which God visibly gathers, let us present “those who are searching” with a clearer picture of the standpoint of the Can. Ref. Churches than that of the Protestant “American” perspective of an invisible Church.

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(a) Church Unity: Shades of Gray?, R Dykstra, Reformed Polemics, Feb. 14/98

(b) The Challenge of Church Union, The Burlington Reformed Study Centre. p.88

© Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern, J.F. MacArthur. p.45

(d) Confession and Church Unity, J. De Jong, Clarion, Feb. 20/98

(e) (g) (h) Denominationalism, Rev. Cl. Stam, Clarion, 1978

(f) Again, The Invisible Church and Open Communion, Rev. J. Moesker.

OBSOLETE TRUTHS

In Christian Renewal of September 22, 1997, one could find the following passage in a “Letter to the Editor.”

Don’t forget, too, that some time ago a theologian in the Vrijgemaakte churches in the Netherlands suggested that the phrase at the end of Art. 29, ‘These two churches are easily known and distinguished from each other’ be removed from the Confession. I would agree with him. The ecclesiastical scene is immeasurably more difficult and complicated than in the time of the Reformation. Our confession should reflect that. It is no longer easy to say: Here a church becomes a false church. That is by no means simple in the ecclesiastical jungle of today.

It is difficult to describe the feelings and thoughts that came up in my heart when reading that. It is equally difficult to decide where to start. Perhaps it is best to begin with the question: “What are our confessions?” Are they documents that reflect the theological thinking in a certain age? And are they consequently to be changed when the trends in theology take a turn to the left or, (but this is practically impossible and definitely unheard of) a turn to the right?

Or are our confessions perhaps documents that describe the factual situation in a certain period of history? So that they have to be changed in order to keep up with the development, in order to be up-to-date?

But if they are that, what certainty have we left? What sense does it make then to declare: “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth”?

Having taught catechism classes for more than forty-two years, I have always tried to make clear to the students that our confessions are a summary of God’s Word.

That is the reason also why many of God’s children refused to deny these solemnly sworn confessions and had to pay for their refusal with imprisonment, banishment, or even their lives.

What our forefathers formulated in our confessions may then as far as the formulation is concerned show the era in which they were drawn up, the contents of the same were gathered from the holy Scriptures and not from contemporary theology or from what they saw around them.

I know that suggestions have been made to remove the last sentence of Question and Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism because ..., yes, because of what?

Because of this perhaps, that Rome’s doctrine concerning the character of the mass has changed? Definitely not, because the old doctrine of the Council of Trent (which prompted the insertion of Q/A 80 into the Catechism) is still as strong as it was some 450 years ago.

No, this suggestion was made because such strong words and expressions are no longer considered acceptable in our “ecumenical” age and in the “dialogues” that are underway on many fronts.

But the Romish doctrine flatly contradicts the teaching of God’s Word as this has been summarized in the confessions. It basically amounts to nothing less than a denial of Christ’s only sacrifice and idolatry. We know that all idolatry is accursed by God.

Now we have the suggestion to delete from the confession the words “These two churches are easily known and distinguished from each other.”

The words “these two churches” refer to the true and the false churches.

I do not know who made the suggestion according to the quotation at the beginning of this article. It was “a theologian in the Vrijgemaakte churches in the Netherlands.”

As little as I know who it is, so little do I know his arguments for it! What I do know is that he may come awfully close to violating his signature under the Subscription Form for Ministers of the Word.

In the second place I wonder why not the official name of our sister churches (The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) is used. I have an idea why this was not done. It makes the following impression: More or less triumphantly it is pointed out that even one of their own theologians (Paul would say: As also one of your own poets has said ...) is coming back from that typically “vrijgemaakt” speaking about the true and the false church. You simply cannot work with it any longer in today’s situation. When are those “liberated people” going to smarten up?

Never!

At least, not as long as they speak the language of the church, for that is what the confession is.

Never - at least not as long as it has not been proved from God’s Word that any part of our confession is not a true and correct summary of that Word.

Thus far I have only heard a lot of sneering remarks at the address of those who simply hold on to the confessions, also to Art.29 of the Belgic Confession, but I have never seen any proof that the church errs when maintaining it and binding her members to it. Have never any unripe statements been made by some who use the terms of the confession?

Who could deny this? I have read utterances that were false, even though confessional terms were used, derived from Art. 29 B.C.

Is it true when it is alleged that all those who maintain Art.29 B.C. also for the present, declare only “their own” church true and all the others false?

It is not. Making such allegations is pure slander, sin against the ninth commandment. No one has the right to make such allegations or to draw such a conclusion when the truth confessed in Art. 29 B.C. is repeated and proclaimed.

But unless one who desires from the heart to find a way “in the ecclesiastical jungle of today,” and tries to find a way out, returns to the truth confessed and formulated also in Art. 29 B.C., he will remain stuck in the impenetrable collection of wild growth.

If there is ever to be a union, a merger between the Canadian Reformed Churches and others, it is mandatory that this become a happy reality on the basis of the Scriptures as these have been summarized in the confessions.

Then it is mandatory that it be not tried to undermine these confessions in any way, as is done, for example, in the above quotation. Only an honest, unreserved and wholehearted agreement with what the church confesses can open the way to such a merger.

It is remarkable that every effort to come to closer contact thus far has come practically exclusively from those “fanatic Canadian Reformed people,” who dare to speak the confessional language, also the language of Art. 29 B.C. Up until now I have not learned of any sincere desire and effort from other quarters to come to a union.

They seem to be quite content to wander about “in the ecclesiastical jungle of today,” every one in his own little clearing, once in a while sending someone to the others to see how they are making out in theirs.

I am beginning to wonder whether we should not quit wasting the money of the churches in sending delegates to broadest assemblies or synods where they are allowed to deliver a nice speech, perhaps even to speak a word or two of advice but from which they return empty-handed, without having achieved anything towards the goal.

In their report on their activities they may describe in how friendly a manner they were received, how brotherly the discussions were, and how much their presence was appreciated. But what they are unable to report is whether any progress was made or any step was taken towards a union with the Canadian Reformed Churches. And that is the intention, isn't it, of maintaining contact.

Surely, we should give others time. We should give them time to get rid of their prejudices and to see us as we are in reality. Above all, we should give them time to come to a good understanding of what the church really is.

For all practical purposes, they are caught in the false theory of the “pluriformity of the church,” and therefore, as far as I can discern, they are content to live beside each other, maintaining friendly relations, exchanging greetings, but leaving everything as it is.

Those who broke with the Christian Reformed Church because of its aberrations and un-Scriptural practices should have done so in the awareness and with the claim that they are the legitimate continuation of the old and faithful Christian Reformed Church, whose roots went back to the beginning of history. They should have reconstituted the federation, simply continuing it, instead of forming various splinter-groups that may have cordial relations with each other, but are content to live alongside each other.

That is the reason why “ecclesiastical jungle growth” has covered much of the ecclesiastical field and is the cause because of which one cannot see the forest for the trees.

In this manner the danger is very real that those who follow that course end up as a sect which, according to the confession of the church, may cover itself with the name of the Church, but remains a sect. I do not say or even suggest that they are this right now, but unless they abandon these pluriformity practices they will become just that.

It is good to put matters as they are and to describe the situation for what it really is. Friendly words do not cure; a brotherly pat on the shoulder does not bring people together. Only the truth can make people really free and can bring them to a unity, which we desire from the heart.

The Canadian Reformed Churches are still standing on the old foundation of God's Word as this is summarized and confessed in the Reformed Confessions. Thus they also uphold Art. 29 B.C., for they believe that in this Article, too, they do not have an obsolete truth or obsolete opinions, but a

summary of what the Lord has revealed to us concerning the Holy Catholic Church, as a summary of the promise of the Gospel, as explained in our Catechism in the part that deals with the question “How I am delivered from my sin and misery.”

When the Christian Reformed Church refused to accept members from the legitimate Reformed Churches in the Netherlands unless they kept silent about the struggle for reformation in these churches, the Canadian Reformed Churches had to be instituted in order to remain in the path of the Catholic Church.

It was with joy that we learned that finally the eyes of many within the Christian Reformed Church were opened for the aberrations that to a large extent were the fruit of influences from the Netherlands, against which the Canadian Reformed Churches warned the Christian Reformed Church repeatedly.

It was with joy that we saw that they sought each other in order to continue and maintain the bond.

It was with sadness that we saw how they did not return to the old Church Order of Dort, but began to experiment with new formulations, ignoring the fact that the deviations from the old, Reformed, Scriptural path of church polity were not caused by the old Church Order, but had crept in as a result of the lust for power on the part of some (even though they may not have realized it) and the lack of vigilance on the part of the vast majority of both office-bearers and membership.

It is with sadness that we saw groups being formed instead of one federation that humbly and gratefully, yet firmly professes to be the legitimate continuation of the Christian Reformed Church.

In spite of differences, it was the confession and claim of both the churches of the Secession and those of the Doleantie, that they were the legitimate Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. But then, especially the men of the Secession dared to repeat publicly and concretely the confession of the church also when it speaks about itself and instructs the members about the difference between the true and the false church. They did not consider that confession to be an outdated statement that had been rendered obsolete by new developments in the ecclesiastical field, but they maintained and professed it as being a summary of what God’s Word teaches us about the Church.

Unless those who have “reconstituted” the old Christian Reformed Church come to realize that Art. 29 B.C. speaks very concretely about the Church, also in our present situation, and as long as openly professing and maintaining this truth is considered to be a specific Canadian Reformed peculiarity, I see very little prospect for an ultimate union or merger with those whose root is the same as ours.

Playing “buddy-buddy” does not produce a pure and solid union. Bowing together, sincerely and unreservedly under the Word of our God and holding on without reservations to the summary of that Word in the Confessions, on the other hand, does.

Only then the jungle will disappear and the field of vision will be unobstructed.

Only then the clearly distinguishable path of the Catholic Church will lie open and be trodden upon in unison and with joy. For this we do not cease praying. Therefore we will also keep working towards that goal.

Rev. W. W. J. Van Oene

Use of the Word 'Amen'

The reason for my short study concerning the use of the small word 'amen' in the Bible is the ongoing discussion about changes in the liturgy in our churches. As a result of decisions taken at the recent synod at Berkel, these matters will also need to be discussed in the local congregations of Katwijk and Valkenburg. I must confess that prior to this study I would not have suspected that I would reach the conclusions which are presented here. I must also add that this brief article is not necessarily the last word on this matter. However, I do believe that I have raised some food for thought.

The Meaning of 'Amen'

The word 'amen' comes from a Hebrew root that, as a verb, can mean: to support, to be loyal, to be certain, and to place faith in. The adverb 'amen' is commonly translated as 'truly'¹.

It is remarkable that this word is generally not translated in the (Greek) New Testament. The Greek speaking churches in the first century after Christ appear to have been confronted with a Hebrew word that they could not easily translate. The word 'amen' is certainly not the only Hebrew word which the new churches used in its original form. Consider only the word 'Abba' (= father); although the use of this word is always immediately followed by a translation (Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). With the word 'amen' this is not considered necessary.

Yet Luke does sometimes translate this little word when it is used by the Lord Jesus in a very special manner; namely, at the beginning of a sentence in order to emphasize His words (see note). Luke then sometimes uses the translation, 'truly' or 'verily' (Luke 4:25; 9:27; 12:44; 21:3). Further, in Rev 1:7 and II Cor 1:20, and possibly Luke 12:5, 'amen' is translated as 'yes' (= 'even so'). In the Septuagint (the current Greek translation of the Old Testament in the time of the Lord Jesus) outside of the apocryphal books, the word 'amen' is left untranslated only three times (I Chron. 16:36; Neh. 5:13; 8:6). Once it is translated as 'truly' and every other time as 'may it be so'. The very literal Greek translation of Aquila (2nd century after Christ) always translates 'amen' as 'truly'.

The translation 'may it be so' is supported in the Old Testament itself where the word 'amen' is followed by the words 'may the Lord do so' (I Kings 1:36; Jer. 28:6).

Beyond these indications about the meaning of 'amen' we must also look at the use of this word. The context in which a word is used is very important in determining its meaning.

Use in the Old Testament

The first thing that strikes us in the Old Testament is the limited use of the word "Amen". We meet it only thirty times, five times as a double word, so that there are only twenty-five passages where we find it. The use of the word can be categorized under four headings of which the first two are by far and away the most important.

1. Acceptance of a curse expression (16 times)

When priests (or other officebearers) uttered a curse- formula on behalf of the Lord then the addressee(s) accepted the consequences of it with the word “Amen”. See Numb. 5:22; Deut. 27:15-26; Neh.5:13; Jer: 11: 5.

2. Concurrence with an expression of praise to the Lord (10 times)

“Amen” is also used after a baruch (praise) formula by the person speaking the formula (Ps 41:14; 72:19; 89:53) as well as all those who hear it (Ps 106:48; 1 Chron. 16:36; Neh 8:6). This type of praise-formula has a standard structure and always begins with the word Baruch: translated as “Blessed/Praised be....”.

3. Concurrence with a prophecy or an announcement made by an other person (2 times)

In Jer 28:6 Jeremiah expresses agreement (sarcastically) with the (false) prophecy of Hananiah in the words: “Amen! The Lord do so”. In 1Kings 1:36 Benaiah concurs with David’s announcement that Solomon will be annointed as king. He litterally says: “Amen! May the Lord, the God of my lord the king, say so.” The fact that both these passages appear to translate the word amen may give the impression that we are dealing with exceptional situations.

4. As a characteristic of God

In Is. 65:16 the Hebrew text twice speaks of “the God of (the) Amen”. Because some think this difficult to translate many often chose to correct the text to “the God of truth”².

Equally important as the texts where we find the word “amen” are the places where it is not used. Two points are noteworthy. First, we note that, although “amen” is often used in signification of accepting a curse-formula, it is never used to accept a blessing! Secondly, “amen” is never used to conclude a prayer.

Use in the New Testament

In the New Testament the word “amen” is used 129 times (statistics according to the 4th edition of Nestle/Aland). This number can, however, be deceptive. Ninety-nine times it is used by our Lord Jesus Himself in a very unusual manner. He often begins a sentence with this word or uses it to give emphasis to what He is saying (e.g. Matt. 7:28-29). As our present study concerns the liturgical use of the word “amen” we will not delve further into Jesus’ manner of speaking.³

Beyond the foregoing this word is used thirty times. When we apply the same categories as we used for the Old Testament then we see the following...

1. Acceptance of a curse expression

There are no examples of curse-formulas in the New Testament. This category is thus not applicable.

2. Concurrence with an expression of praise for the Lord (23 times)

A statement of praise (at times, but not always, in the same form as used in the Old Testament) is often concluded with an “amen” by the person expressing it (Rom.1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 16:27; Gal. 1:5; Eph.3:21; Phil.4:20; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 13:21; 1 Pet. 4:11;

5:11; 2 Pet. 3:18; Jude 1:25; Rev. 1:6; 7:12) as well as by those present who hear it (1Cor.14:16; 2 Cor. 1:20; Rev. 5:14; 7:12; 19:4.).

In addition to the texts already cited we may add Matt. 6:13 where, according to many manuscripts, an expression of praise (followed by “amen”) concludes the Lord’s Prayer.

3. Concurrence with a prophecy or an announcement made by another person (2 times)

In Rev.1:7 and 22:20 we find a prophecy / announcement concluded with an ‘amen’. In the first passage the ‘amen’ is expressed by the one making the announcement, John, himself. In the second passage John utters an ‘amen’ to the word of the Lord Jesus. In Rev.1:7 the word “amen” is used in addition to its translation “yes”. In Rev.22:20 John repeats the words with which he concurs. As in the Old Testament so also here the impression is given that this is an extra-ordinary use of the word “amen”.

4. As a characteristic of God

The texts from Isaiah discussed above appear to receive an echo in Rev.3:14 where “the Amen” is used as a title for Jesus.

In addition to these categories we may add two more...

5. Confirmation of a blessing formula

A blessing formula (greeting) is often confirmed with a concluding “amen” by the person passing on the blessing (cf. Rom. 15:33; Gal. 6:18). Many manuscripts also add an “amen” to the following texts: Rom. 16:24; 1 Cor. 16:24; 2 Cor. 13:14; Phil.4:23; Col. 4:18; 1 Thess. 5:28; 2Thess.3:18; 2 Tim. 4:22; Tit. 3:15; Philemon 1:25; Heb. 13:25; 1Pet. 5:14; Rev. 22:21.

Seeing that these texts are all at the end (or nearly at the end) of a letter it is difficult to decide if they should be separated from the following category. Such difficulty is increased when we notice that blessings at the beginning of letters (e.g. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3 etc.) are never concluded with the word “amen”!

6. As a conclusion

Just as in the previous category the word “amen” was used as a conclusion, it is also used as such in many manuscripts of the first two letters of John (without a preceding word of praise or blessing). The same goes for Mark 16:9 in the so-called short ending of that gospel. This use for the word amen was frequently employed in the early Christian church. In this way the “amen” marks the end of the story or letter.

Conclusions

The most frequent use of the word “amen”: is to affirm praise to the Lord. This may be expressed by the speaker as well as the hearers. It is a remarkable fact that the word “amen” is never used in

the Bible to affirm a blessing directed at oneself.⁴ I would suggest that this would be considered haughty and therefore inappropriate. If someone is so kind as to say something good about me it would be very rude to respond with "Amen, it is true and certain"! This would certainly apply to a blessing received from the Lord. The practice, which is becoming more and more popular, of allowing the whole congregation to say "amen" after the blessing at the end of the worship service, ought to be rejected. If an "amen" is uttered after the blessing then it should be spoken by the minister/ elder as a kind of conclusion in line with the examples in category 5 above.

Equally remarkable is the fact that "amen" is not used to conclude any prayers in the Bible. In the Lord's Prayer the "amen" affirms the expression of praise that concludes the prayer. I do not know when, in the course of the centuries, it became common to use "amen" as a conclusion for prayer.⁵ For us it has a practical advantage since we pray with our eyes closed. In Bible times men prayed with outstretched arms by lifting up their eyes toward heaven. This meant that everyone could see when the prayer was finished. That is not so easy when everyone has their eyes shut.

In the early Christian church by far the majority of prayers ended with an expression of praise concluded with an accompanying "amen" (following the example of the Lord's Prayer), and that is possibly a good idea for us. While not required, it is appropriate to conclude our prayer with an expression of praise. The concluding "amen" would then also receive a richer meaning.

I also have a few remarks with regard to our liturgy. If it is inappropriate to say "amen" after a blessing directed toward ourselves then the "amen" after the votum is also inappropriate. The votum ('Our help is in the name of the Lord ...') is expressed by the minister/elder on behalf of the congregation. The congregation expresses its dependency on God, His goodness and grace by which He desires to be our help. It would, however, be possible for the whole congregation to utter the votum!

The expression of "amen" after the greeting at the beginning of the service does not follow biblical examples either. When it occurs it is a result of the uses noted in category 5. It certainly may not be expressed by the congregation since the greeting brings a blessing intended for the congregation itself.

In the liturgies in use by us at present we do not have a separate place for a spoken expression of praise for the Lord. That does not mean that we cannot find expressions of praise

for the Lord in our worship services (consider the psalms, prayers, etc.) , but it does not form a separate part of the liturgy. This was not so in the synagogue services around the time of the Lord Jesus. They began with such an expression of praise. This use of a praise formula in

Christian form was copied by the apostles who often begin their letters in this way (cf. 2 Cor 1:3-5; Eph. 1:3-14; 1Peter 1:3-5). The most well known baruch (praise) formula in the New Testament is probably the first half of the so-called Song of Zachariah (Luke 1:68-75). I would like to suggest to the deputies for liturgy that a praise formula (possibly from the aforementioned texts) could follow the greeting. In this way we could give form to a part of the liturgy from the Jewish synagogue which was used by the apostles and is often echoed in the psalms (e.g. Ps 72:18-18; 144:1-2; etc.). If this element remains absent in the liturgy, it is still possible to let the sermon end with an expression of praise. It would be very fitting for the whole congregation to conclude such an

expression of praise with their “amen”. The texts listed above show that both in the Old as well as in the New Testament it was common for the whole congregation to communally express their “amen”.

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Notes:

1. I do not want to suggest that use of other words from the same root are trustworthy comparisons for correct meaning (Cf.J.Barr, Semantics of Biblical Language[OUP, 1961] 100-106).
- 2.The suggested rendering only concerns the vowels that do not occur in the original Hebrew text. Then “ameen” is changed to “omen”. In Isaiah 25:1 the word “omen” (truth) is used, but it is only a “hapax (meaning: a word that is only found once). Beside, both the Septuagint and Aquilla present Isaiah 25:1 with “ameen” instead of “omen”.
3. It is sad that this use of the word “amen” has been translated away in most Bible translations. Even though it might sound strange for us to translate: “Amen, amen I say unto to you...”, we must remember that it would have sounded equally strange to the Greek readers of the gospels.
4. Sometimes it is suggested that where “amen” is used in passages such as Rom. 15:33; 16:24; and Gal. 6:18 Paul would have been thinking about the congregation who would expressing the “amen”. The first comment that should be made is that Paul never suggests such a thing in any of his letters. It is a theory. For such a theory to be acceptable one would first have to prove that there was an existing practice for congregations to communally express their “amen” after the blessing. This is not easy. The only information from the first century after Christ that we have concerning this matter is I Cor. 14:16 from where we learn that it was customary (at least in Corinth) to express a communal “amen” after a praise formula (“Blessed be / Praised be the Lord...”). From the second century after Christ we learn that it was common (at least in Rome, but also compare Dionys.Alex. in Eus. HE. 7.9.4) to communally express the “amen” after the expression of praise at the end of the Thanksgiving after the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (Just. 1 Apol. 65.3). We don’t have any other information from this century about the “amen” in the worship service. It is also true that during the worship services in the synagogues the congregation expressed “amen” after each of the three sections of the Aaronic blessing. But this information comes from the Babylonian Talmud of the 8th century after Christ and (if trustworthy) speaks about the worship services at the end of the third century after Christ (Sota 39b - we can also learn from Misjna, Sota 7.5 that the Jews had no objection to an “amen” after a blessing). All told there is no proof of communal “amen” after an expression of blessing in the time of the New Testament. The theory of the “amen” in Paul’s letters can therefore not be accepted.
- 5.The earliest example that I am aware of can be found the apocryphal book Tobit 8:8

CHURCH NEWS

At Classis Alberta/Manitoba, March 10, 1998 the following decision was made: “Classis, having heard the request of the Church at Denver to seek the release of Rev. M. Pollock according to Article 12 C.O., and having heard from the Rev. M. Pollock his request to be released according to Article 12, and further, having heard the Church Visitors’ advice to the Church at Denver suggesting to release Rev. M. A. Pollock according to Article 12, decides with sorrow to grant the release of Rev. M. A. Pollock from his office as minister of the Word.” The deputies of Regional Synod gave concurring advice. The chairman wished the Church at Denver much wisdom and the blessings of the Lord in dealing with this sad situation of Rev. M. Pollock’s release from the office of minister of the Word.

A proposal from the Church of Providence Edmonton to change the regulations of Classis was adopted as follows: If observers are present at Classis upon invitation by the convening Church, the chair shall give these observers the floor sometime during the meeting to address Classis. The convening Church shall inform the session of the local FCS congregation that the observers shall not be admitted to closed sessions, as per Classical Regulations Article 3.B.2.

[Excerpts from Press Release of Classis Alberta/Manitoba, March 10, 1998 Rev. W. Slomp Vice-Chairman]