



Worth Remembering

JAN DEGELDER

Do you remember your birthday? Of course! How can you possibly forget with a festive reminder every year? Do you remember the day you were baptized? Uhhhh . . . no! Should I? Would that be important enough for an annual celebration? Let's think about this a bit more.

Some of us have come to faith and were baptized as adults. That was an important moment on an important day in your life. You will remember the water on your face. If you were baptized as a baby, you won't remember the water on your head, but that does not make the event less important. If you don't know the date, try to find your baptism certificate. If you cannot locate it, or if

you never received one, ask the person who keeps the records of your church. After all, we do have Article 64 in our Church Order, which says: "The consistory shall maintain church records in which the names of the members and the dates of their birth, baptism, public profession of faith, marriage and departure or death are properly recorded."

It reads like a simple, practical rule—keep track of church statistics. This helps the elders remember who the communicant and the non-communicant members are under their care and allows for a smooth transition when members move and join another local church. But there is more to it than just administrative interest.



MORE THAN STATISTICS

The deeper reason for Article 64 comes out more clearly in the location and wording of this stipulation before the revision of our Church Order in 1983. At that time, the article about church records was Article 60. The old articles 56–59 all spoke about baptism, and then Article 60 said: “The names of those baptized, together with those of the parents and witnesses, and likewise the date of Baptism, shall be recorded.” It says nothing about recording other events—just baptism. This goes straight back all the way to the Church Order of Dort (1618/19).

However, since the 19th century, in most countries it is the civil authorities who register births, marriages, and deaths. This makes sense. Such data has legal ramifications in public society. Only the church continues to record the date of your baptism (and, since 1983, also your profession of faith). Why is that?

In Article 57, the Church Order speaks about baptism as “sealing the covenant of God.” In other words, by recording your baptism the church acknowledges the significance of God’s grace and faithfulness in your life. Your baptism certificate is proof that, then and there, God assured you who you are and who you belong to. Old Article 60 also required recording the names of the parents. After all, they are the ones who promise to instruct you in the doctrine

of God’s Word, so that, by God’s grace and the Holy Spirit, you learn to respond in faith to what God has promised you when he included you in his covenant.

When you understand what it means to be baptized and you recognize the impact of your baptism, recording this event in your life becomes extremely meaningful. You are incorporated, or grafted, into God’s covenant and congregation! (see Lord’s Day 27.) This goes way beyond collecting statistical data. It was the day that God publicly declared: “I am your God and you are my child.” That makes it the most beautiful day of your life, really. Perhaps celebrating (or at least remembering) the day of your baptism is not as weird as it sounds.

GOD MADE THE FIRST MOVE

From the day of your baptism onward, your life is marked by that covenant relationship. That’s why we don’t say: “*I have been* baptized,” but “*I am* baptized.” This is how God’s children go through life. To be sure, in your baptism God also calls you to believe in Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, to put your faith in the Saviour’s sacrifice for the forgiveness of all your sins. Baptism does not remove the need to be born again. But the records of the church confirm that God’s love came first.

The records of the church remind you of what identifies you today. Remembering your baptism is remembering the day that God proclaimed your new identity. Never think of yourself as separate from Jesus. I am his and he is my Lord.

You can try to deny this and ignore your baptism, but you can never undo your baptism. If you attempt to do so, the records of the church will testify against you. What did you do with God's promises? How did you respond to God's love?

All of this underlines that what we have agreed upon in Article 64 of the Church Order is important, not just for practical, statistical reasons, but for spiritual reasons. Is it not liberating to know that I don't have to find out on my own who I am, what my identity is? We can confidently confess that, "I am not my own but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ" (Lord's Day 1). This is what God himself confirms in your baptism. He determines who I am, before I could even think or say something about my identity.

Therefore, "the consistory shall maintain records with the baptism dates of all the members." Most of our churches use the Church Social app and I would encourage the app's creators to add under "membership information" the date of baptism. I do remember from the past, and occasionally I still hear it, that an attestation came in without the date of baptism. "We couldn't find it. . . !" That's a shame. Those records should be kept carefully, so that they are complete and accessible.

JUST STUFFY STUFF?

This brings me to another one of those often-overlooked church order articles, Article 43: "The consistories and the major assemblies shall ensure that proper care is taken of the archives." How important is that? Apart from a few serious history buffs, who cares about archives? The Bible says that everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved (John 3:16; Romans 10:11-13). Is that not what the church is all about? How do archives fit into this picture?

Imagine a consistory meeting in, let's say Lystra, in the second half of the 1st century. There have been some controversies in the congregation about what is required in order to be saved. A long-time elder, br. Nestor, says "many years ago we got a letter from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this. I remember that it was very helpful and encouraging" (Acts 16:4-5). "I didn't know that," says br. Jason, who is much younger, "Is that letter still around?" "I don't think so," br. Nestor replies. "At that time br. Hermes took it home, but he is gone."

The reality is that some issues will come back, perhaps in a different format or context. That's why in the old Church Order

we had Articles 45 and 46. The intention of these articles was to prevent matters from being discussed and decided that had been dealt with already at previous assemblies. Since the 17th century already, several synods have emphasized how important it is to be aware of previous decisions. Indeed, the church is in the business of proclaiming and teaching the gospel of salvation by grace alone. But that includes the responsibility to guard this gospel, to refute false doctrine, and to stay the course of faithful submission to God's Word.

Today we have this rule against unnecessarily revisiting past matters in Article 33 CO, but to facilitate this, Article 43 has been added about caring for the archives. That's not the only function of archives. Henry Ford is famously quoted as having said "history is bunk" (although historical nitpickers will tell you that he actually said, "history is more or less bunk"). But his point is clear: don't bother with the past. However, God's people know there is more to it than that. Archives allow us to tell the story of when and how the church, or the churches, have been faithful or have become unfaithful in times past. To put it differently: archives allow us to recognize and tell the next generation how the Lord has gathered, defended, and preserved his church throughout the ages.

WHO'S YOUR ARCHIVIST?

Major assemblies usually appoint an "archive church." But who is responsible for this in your local church? You need an archivist who is genuinely interested in keeping the archives in good order and who is willing to learn how to do it. A lot of material comes to the table of consistories and major assemblies. Discerning what exactly has historical significance and what does not is somewhat open for interpretation. That makes it helpful to give clear instruction as to the materials that should be kept.

I know the archives of a local church in Canada or elsewhere are only a very tiny part of the history of the great church gathering work. But that's not a good reason to become sloppy and negligent when it comes to taking proper care of the documents that have historical significance for the history of the local church or the federation. 



Jan DeGelder

Minister Emeritus

Redemption Canadian Reformed Church, Flamborough

jdegelder8@gmail.com