

# THE BELGIC CONFESSION

## *Introduction*

The Belgic Confession is the first of what is commonly known as the Three Forms of Unity, the confessional standard generally adopted by Continental Reformed Churches. It was born out of persecution of Reformed believers by the Spanish King, Philip II, an ally of the Papacy. Written around 1561 in the Southern Lowlands of the Netherlands, now known as Belgium, it was generally attributed to Guido de Bres, an itinerant preacher and his associates. It was originally designed to persuade the king that Reformed believers were not rebels but law-abiding citizens who love the Word of God and professed only such doctrines as are taught in the Scriptures. While the king was not moved by the attempt, the written testimony soon became an expression of faith of a people under persecution. It was adopted by several national synods on the continent in the 16th century and after careful revision was adopted by the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619 as part of the Three Forms of Unity.

The Belgic Confession as such preceded the Westminster Confession of Faith by almost thirty years. And although there is no evidence that the Westminster Assembly consulted the Belgic Confession, it is not difficult to see the harmony of thought between the two Confessions. There are of course some differences between the two Confessions. For example, the statements in the BC tends to be more experimental and warmer since they were born out of persecution; whereas the WCF is more precise, systematic and comprehensive. Also, the WCF embraces some important theological constructions and developments such as the doctrine of the Covenant of Works and of Grace, which is omitted in the BC.

While we do not use the BC as part of our subordinate standards, I think it is edifying for us to be familiar with it, and through it to be deepened in our knowledge of Scriptures and understanding of doctrine.

## Article I

# There Is Only One God

*We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God; and that He is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.*

### **Comment**

We can sense the warm and personal language of this Confession almost immediately as we enter it. “*We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth...*” This is a personal confession, not so much a systematic statement of doctrine. These opening words are of course taken from Roman 10:9-10. As believers, we must not only believe in the heart, we must also confess (*homologeô*—to say the same thing) with our lips together with other believers united to Christ with us, what we actually believe to be the doctrine taught in God’s Word.

One of the first things we must confess together is our belief that there is only one living and true God. What can we say about this God? In our Catechism, we are taught to say: “God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth” (*WSC 4*).

But no less true is what is taught, albeit less systematically, in the BC. There is only one God, and he is a simple and spiritual being, we are told. In other words, he cannot be divided into parts and he does not have a body like us. What else do the Scriptures reveal about Him? The BC lists ten attributes, without any attempt to classify them into communicable or incommunicable perfections, quite unlike in the WSC.

Firstly, God is eternal (cf. Dt 33:27), that is to say, He exists in and of himself and has no beginning or end.

Secondly, God is incomprehensible. Finite mind cannot fully comprehend all that God reveals about himself, not to mention know everything about God.

Thirdly, God is invisible. Since He is a spirit-being, he cannot be seen or felt. When He does appear to man it is either in an anthropomorphism or in Christ the God-Man.

Fourthly, God is immutable since he is perfect and cannot change for the better or for the worse.

Fifthly, God is infinite, that is to say there are no bounds in his being and

he is perfect in all his attributes.

Sixthly, God is almighty. He is omnipotent and He is sovereignly in control of everything.

Seventhly, God is perfectly wise. He knows everything and comprehends everything before the foundation of the world. He makes no mistakes whatsoever.

Eighthly, God is just. He is infinitely, eternally and unchangeably just. There is no unfairness in Him. Even love and compassion cannot trounce God's justice.

Ninthly, God is good. God is perfectly good. In fact, we know what is good and what is bad only by measuring it against God and God's Word.

Tenthly, God is the overflowing fountain of all good. He is the source of all goodness and all blessings in the entire universe. All he does is good, even the things that do not appear to be good to men, for "we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). But man must especially acknowledge anything that they perceive to be beneficial to them as coming ultimately from God, the overflowing fountain of all good.

## Article II

### By What Means God Is Made Known unto Us

*We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even His everlasting power and divinity, as the Apostle Paul says (Rom 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.*

#### **Comment**

God is the infinite and eternal Creator and Governor, whereas man is a finite and temporal creature. Therefore, unless God reveals Himself to man, there is no way for us to know Him.

How does God reveal Himself? He reveals Himself in two ways, which we may call General Revelation and Special Revelation. This division is beautifully demonstrated in Psalm 19, where the first six verses, is about General Revelation and the remaining eight verses is about Special Revelation.

General Revelation refers essentially to Creation and Providence, the latter of which is spoken of in terms of preservation and government in the confessional statement we are considering. Remarkably, we are brought in this same statement to think of General Revelation in terms of “*a most elegant book*,” no doubt, as a compendium to the Bible. Those who would read this book will find in it all creatures great and small living and non-living, testifying of the everlasting power and divinity of God.

God has, as it were, left His fingerprints and footprint everywhere in nature both in the design of all things and the way that things live and work. The natural man, can by mere observation, come to a conclusion that there is a Creator who is powerful and wise to whom he must give an account for his life. Therefore, no man has any valid excuse not acknowledge God and to seek to live for the glory of God, though all fallen man try to hold down the truth in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18-20).

The Book of Nature is nevertheless insufficient to show fallen man how he ought to live and how he may find salvation. For this reason, God has given us a second book, commonly known as the Bible. The Bible is God’s holy and divine Word given by inspiration of the Spirit of God (2 Tim 3:16). It is in this second book of Special Revelation that God reveals to us all that is necessary for us to know for us to obtain salvation and to live for

God's glory.

## Article III

# The Written Word of God

*We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of man, but that men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit, as the apostle Peter says; and that afterwards God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation, commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed word to writing; and He Himself wrote with His own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.*

### **Comment**

This is the first of five articles on the Holy Scriptures in the Belgic Confession, and is really an introduction explaining the origin of the Scriptures. Article IV lists the books of inspired Scriptures; Article V explains the reason and basis of our confidence in the Holy Scriptures; Article VI is an apology against regarding the apocrypha as part of Scriptures; and Article VII is an affirmation of the sufficiency of Scriptures.

The holy and divine Scriptures is the Word of God, not the words of men about God. They have their origin in the mind and will of God.

God spoke in many ways directly and indirectly (cf. Heb 1:1). He spoke to Adam directly. He spoke on Mount Sinai in the hearing of the whole nation of Israel. But most times, He spoke through His prophets “as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet 1:21) or “the Spirit of Christ which was in them” (1 Pet 1:10). We think of Enoch (Jude 1:14) and Noah (2 Pet 2:5, 1 Pet 1:19-20) and the subsequent prophets and later the apostles in the New Testament.

However, for reason of the “*special care which He has for us and our salvation,*” God ordained another method of communicating to us, namely through writing.

Note that strictly speaking, it was not “*afterwards*” that God commanded his servants to commit His revealed word to writing. Nor did His servant merely obey God’s command to put His words in writing as suggested by the somewhat imprecise language of the confessional statement we are considering.

In reality, although it is true that from Adam to Moses (or Job if we take him as the first writing prophet), God’s Word was not inscripturated, we should understand that God had begun to have His Word written down even when He was still speaking through His prophet and revealing His truth to them. Also, the Word is committed to writing through the inspiration of the word of God so that although the prophet or apostle

might not be aware of it, what they wrote,—every jot and tittle of it,—were the inspired word of God (2 Tim 3:16; Mt 5:18). The apostle Paul was certainly not consciously obeying a direct command by the Lord to put what was revealed to him into writing. He wrote letters as he saw the need, but in the inscrutable wisdom of God, some of his letters were inspired by the Holy Spirit while others were not. His first and third known letters to the Corinthians (see 1 Cor 5:9; 2 Cor 2:4, 9), for example, were not inspired.

Theologically, we call this process by which God's Word is inscripturated organic inspiration as opposed to mechanical inspiration where the authors were simply being moved like robots to write or dynamic inspiration where the authors were simply writing what they felt and knew without any direct influence of the Holy Spirit.

Today, as we shall see from BC 8, we have the complete revelation of God's Word in the Bible, the holy and divine scriptures. This is how God speaks to us objectively and authoritatively today. W

## Article IV

# Canonical Books of the Holy Scriptures

*We believe that the Holy Scriptures are contained in two books, namely, the Old and the New Testament, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged. These are thus named in the Church of God.*

*The books of the Old Testament are the five books of Moses, to wit: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; the book of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the two books of Samuel, the two of the Kings, two books of the Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther; Job, the Psalms, the three books of Solomon, namely, the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs; the four great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah (Lamentations), Ezekiel, and Daniel; and the twelve lesser prophets, namely, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.*

*Those of the New Testament are the four evangelists, to wit: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; the thirteen epistles of the apostle Paul, namely, one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, one to the Ephesians, one to the Philippians, one to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, two to Timothy, one to Titus, one to Philemon; Hebrews; the seven epistles of the other apostles, namely, one of James, two of Peter, three of John, one of Jude; and the Revelation of the apostle John.*

### **Comment**

This article is straightforward, it simply states the composition of Holy Scriptures accepted by the Church of God. There are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. These 66 books constitute the Canon (or the standard authoritative collection) of Scripture. These are written by historical human persons under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Since the authorship of the books was largely not questioned at the time of the Reformation, the confession simply states the commonly accepted view. Today, after almost four hundred years of study, conservative and Reformed Christianity have generally not found any indisputable reason to challenge the accepted views. Yes, liberal Christians,—which are really not Christians,—have challenged the authorship of many of the books, but the basis of their conclusions is really unbelief! They simply do not believe that God inspired the books! And yes, some of the Reformers were not sure of the authorship of some of the books. For example, Calvin did not think that Paul wrote Hebrews. However, the opinion does not extend to the authenticity and canonicity of the letter.

Indeed, all truly Reformed and Presbyterian Christians would agree that

*“against [the canonicity of the 66 books] nothing can be alleged.”* This means that the canon is closed: no book may be added and no book may be subtracted from it. Revelation is complete and sufficient. We do not believe, for example that if the lost letters of Paul were discovered they could be added to the Canon; nor do we believe that the Apocrypha of which we will say more in Article VI, is part of the Canon. Likewise, we believe that Martin Luther was seriously in error when he complained that the Epistle of James was “an epistle of straw with no character of the Gospel in it”; or when he assigned the books of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation to an appendix to his German translation of the Bible.

## Article V

# Whence the Holy Scriptures Derive Their Dignity and Authority

*We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the Church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they carry the evidence thereof in themselves. For the very blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.*

### Comment

There are 66 books in the Christian, or more precisely Protestant, Canon of Scripture. We regard these to be holy in that they are given by God and therefore set apart by Him to be the revelation of His mind and His will to man and especially to us who are his sons and daughters. They are, as such, the *foundation* and *confirmation* of our faith. The content of our faith is expressed in words in them; and therefore we may only confirm or verify our faith against what is inscribed in them. Indeed, we are truly the sons and daughters of God because we believe *without any doubt all things contained in them*, they being the Word of God.

But why do “we receive all these books, and these only”? Admittedly, one of the reasons we receive them is that *the church receives and approves them as such*. But this is really a secondary, by-the-way, reason. Unlike Roman Catholicism, we do not believe that the Canon is authoritative because the Church gave her *Imprimatur* or approval. The Church is the foundation of the truth not in the sense that the church determines the truth, but that the church must uphold the truth. The Church does not declare the inspiration of any book, it simply recognises the inspiration of it. So in AD. 364 the Council of Laodicea, ordained that none but canonical books should be read in the church—namely the books in the Old and the New Testament. The council did not stamp an *imprimatur* on any of the books to say “the church hereby declares that the book is inspired and may be published.” The inspiration was recognised and the books deemed to be canonical.

But why did the church come to recognise the sixty-six books of the Bible to be holy and canonical in the first place?

Well, the church accepts the Old Testament canon because our Lord Jesus Christ accepted it. This is clear from our Lord’s reference to “the Law of Moses, prophets and the psalms” in his instruction to His disciples

in Luke 24:44.

We must realise that the Hebrew canon was already in place before Christ walked in Israel. Many believe that it was Ezra who led the council of scholars in about 300 BC to affirm the canonicity of the OT books.

By the time of the Lord Jesus, the Hebrew Bible was already in place. It was, however, organized in a manner that is quite different from the OT we know. It had 3 divisions: (1) Torah (Law—Pentateuch); (2) Nebi'im (Prophets—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings & all the prophetic books except Lamentation and Daniel) and (3) Kethubhim (writings—the rest of the books, including the poetic books and Chronicles, which is the last book in the Hebrew canon). This third part is often called the Psalms because the book of Psalms is the largest book in the section (just like the northern tribes of Israel are often called Ephraim because it is the largest of these tribes).

When we understand this, it is not difficult for us to see how the Lord Jesus was really referring to the Hebrew canon when He referred to the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. And to add to that, we see how on another occasion, the Lord Jesus spoke of the first and last prophet to be martyred as being Abel and Zacharias. Zacharias was certainly not the last of the prophets to be martyred. Urijah was martyred some 200 years later (Jer 26:20-21, 23). However, the death of Zacharias is recorded in 2 Chronicles 24:20-21. 2 Chronicles, as we noted, is the last book in the accepted Hebrew Canon. The Lord Jesus was referring to a canonical order rather than a temporal order!

What about the New Testament? Well, how the New Testament came to be accepted is a bit more complicated, but briefly, it would involve informal assessment of each book received upon 5 criteria, namely: (1) Authority; (2) Authorship; (3) Authenticity; (4) Applicability; and (5) Acceptance

*Authority* has to do with whether there is an authoritative claim that it is the word of God (e.g. Rev 1:19; 1 Cor 14:37; 2 Th 3:14-15; 2 Pet 3:16; 1 Tim 5:18, cf. Dt 25:4; Lk 10:7). *Authorship* has to do with whether the book was written by an apostle, or a recognised apostolic (prophetic) man (cf. 2 Pet 3:2). *Agreement* has to do with whether the content of the book agrees internally and externally with the other inspired scriptures. *Applicability* asks whether the book is life-changing. Does it come with the life-transforming power of God? Does it have the ability to inspire, convict and edify both individuals and the local congregation (cf. Acts 7:38; Rom 12:1-2; Jn 10:27a)? Finally, *Acceptance* has to do with whether the book was received, collected, read and used by the early church. This is especially important as in the early church there were those who had the

gift of prophecy and of discernment, who were able to verify if a letter received was truly inspired by the Holy Spirit.

These, then, are some of the reasons why the church came to accept the sixty-six books of the Bible as holy and canonical.

The question still remains as to why we, as individual confessing believers, accept them. Obviously, we do not go through the same informal or intuitive reasoning that the church might have engaged in. So why do we believe these books to be the Word of God? Well, as we mentioned, since we are part of the church and have placed ourselves under the jurisdiction of the church, we cannot deny that the church's reception and approval of these books is an important reason for our belief. However, more than that, as stated so succinctly in the present article, there are two key reasons under-girding our confidence. The first is that *"the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God."* This is one of the works of the Spirit of Adoption (Rom 8:15), for He enables us to recognise the Father and also to recognise the voice of our Shepherd. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" says the Lord (cf. Jn 10:27). But secondly, we are compelled to believe that these books *"carry the evidence thereof in themselves."* WCF 1.5 enlarges on this thought in the words, *"... the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God."* Additionally, we see many prophecies recorded in it clearly fulfilled. For example, Psalm 22 is written almost 1000 years before Christ was born, and yet it graphically detailed the death of the Lord by crucifixion, the parting of his garments, etc. Surely the present article is right that *"the very blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being [or have been] fulfilled."* It is fulfilled in the New Testament, and to a degree fulfilled today in our lives as the warning of Scripture comes to pass (e.g. 2 Tim 2:1-5).

## Article VI

# The Difference Between the Canonical and Apocryphal Books

*We distinguish those sacred books from the apocryphal, viz: the third and fourth books of Esdras, the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Jesus Sirach, Baruch, the Appendix to the book of Esther, the Song of the Three Children in the Furnace, the History of Susannah, of Bel and the Dragon, the Prayer of Manasseh, and the two books of the Maccabees. All of which the Church may read and take instruction from, so far as they agree with the canonical books; but they are far from having such power and efficacy that we may from their testimony confirm any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less may they be used to detract from the authority of the other, that is, the sacred books.*

### Comment

The ‘*Apocrypha*’ refers to hidden or concealed writings. When the term is used in Christian writings, it usually refers to a loose collection of late Jewish books written during the period 170 B.C. to A.D. 70. The Belgic Confession lists fourteen of the books. It is often thought that these books constitute the Apocrypha and are regarded as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. The truth is that they only accept eleven of these books as canonical (or as they prefer to call it, deuterocanonical). The books referred to as “third and fourth books of Esdras” and “the Prayer of Manasseh” are not part of the Roman Catholic Canon. “Third Esdras” is accepted as deuterocanonical by the Eastern Orthodox together with the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151 and Third Maccabees. Fourth Maccabees is found in the appendix of Greek Orthodox Bibles. Fourth Esdras is found in Jerome’s Vulgate in the Appendix and is accepted as canonical by the Gregorian or Armenian Orthodox Church.

Some of these books, for example 1 and 2 Maccabees contain helpful information about the inter-testamental period. However, we reject the canonicity and inspiration of all apocryphal books for several reasons:

Firstly, we reject the apocrypha as Scripture based on internal evidence:

(1) None of the apocryphal books claim inspiration and some actually disclaimed inspiration. E.g., 2nd Maccabees concludes with a suggestion that the book is a human literary attempt to the best of the author’s ability: “And here will I make an end. 38 And if I have done well, and as is fitting the story, it is that which I desired: but if slenderly and meanly, it is that which I could attain unto” (2 Maccabees 15:38,39, KJV). Similarly, in the prologue of the book of Ecclesiasticus, which is the most highly regarded of the apocryphal books, the author, Jesus son of Sirach appeals:

“Wherefore let me intreat you to read it with favour and attention, and to pardon us, wherein we may seem to come short of some words, which we have laboured to interpret.”

(2) Some contain historical errors. E.g., Judith mistakenly identifies Nebuchadnezzar as king of the Assyrians (1:1, 7) and 1 Esdras places King Artaxerxes I before Darius I (2:30), possibly because of a misinterpretation of Ezra 2. Similarly, Tobit assumes that Sennacherib is the son of Shalmaneser (1:15) instead of Sargon II.

(3) Some contain contradictions. E.g. Tobit claims to have been alive when Jeroboam revolted in 931 B.C. (1:4-6) and when Assyria conquered Israel in 722 B.C. (1:3,10). This, despite the fact that he lived only 158 years (14:11)!

(4) Some teach doctrine that cannot be reconciled with the 39 books of the Hebrew canon or the 27 books of the New Testament. E.g. Tobit teaches that alms-giving atones for sin: (4:10; 12:9). Tobit also endorses the superstitious use of fish liver to ward off demons (6: 6,7)! 2 Maccabees teaches prayers for the dead (12:45-46).

Secondly, we have ground to reject it for historical reasons: (1) Jewish scholars of repute were unanimous in rejecting them (e.g. Philo, Josephus and the scholars of the council Jamnia, A.D. 90). (2) No canon or council before the 1st 4 centuries recognised them. (3) Jerome (340-420), the great scholar who translated the Latin Vulgate rejected their canonicity, saying: they “are not in the canon” and that they may be read “for edification of the people but not for establishing the authority of ecclesiastical dogmas.” (4) The Reformers unanimously rejected them. (5) Some of them were only given canonical status by the Roman Catholic Church in the Council of Trent in AD 1546 in reaction to the Reformation.

Thirdly, but very importantly, although the apocrypha were already in common use in the first century, the Lord Jesus makes no reference to these books, and therefore certainly did not countenance their use at all. On the contrary, we notice in our previous study how our Lord suggests that the Canon of Scripture is as per the 39 books in the Hebrew Old Testament.

Roman Catholic apologists sometimes point out that the New Testament contains allusions or parallels to some of the apocryphal books (e.g. Matt 27:42-43; cf. Wisdom 2:12-20; Heb 11:37; cf. 2 Mac 7) and therefore they must be inspired. Such reasoning is of little strength when we consider the fact that any writer may quote or allude to something in a work which he takes to be true without affirming the value or truth of the book as a whole,

much less ascribing divine authority to it. The Apostle, for example, quoted from a pagan poet in 1 Corinthians 15:33!

Accordingly, these books are of no authority in the true Church of God. And neither should we approve of them, nor give higher regard to them than any other human writings. We, as such agree with the present article of the Belgic Confession that *“the Church may read and take instruction from [from the apocryphal books], so far as they agree with the canonical books; but they are far from having such power and efficacy that we may from their testimony confirm any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less may they be used to detract from the authority of the other, that is, the sacred books.”* We must, however, clarify that these books should never be used in public worship or for any devotional exercises.

## Article VII

# The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures to Be the Only Rule of Faith

*We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: nay, though it were an angel from heaven, as the apostle Paul says. For since it is forbidden to add unto or take away anything from the Word of God, it does thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects.*

*Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us, saying, Prove the spirits, whether they are of God. Likewise: If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house.*

### Comment

God revealed himself in many special (contra general) ways since creation (Heb 1:1). But the Holy Scriptures is that part of God's special revelation that is committed to writing and is declared to be sufficient. In 2 Timothy 3:16, for example, we are told that all Scriptures is given by the inspiration of God and profitable for believer for their perfection. The prophets, the apostles and the Lord Jesus himself said many things during their earthly sojourn, but what is not recorded is not necessary to render the Scriptures complete and sufficiency. The Scriptures, namely the 66 books of the Bible, is the complete Word of God and is sufficient for our salvation, and by implication, for our obedience, worship and enjoyment of God.

It is to underline this fact, that the apostle Paul reminds us that "If any man [or angel] preach any other gospel unto [us] than that [we] have received, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8-9). That which we have received of the gospel, we received from inspired scriptures. And since we must not add or diminish from the word of God (cf. Dt 4:2), we must necessarily infer that the Scriptures "*is most perfect and complete in all respects.*"

This is an important truth. During the time of the Reformation, neither Rome nor the Anabaptist held to this truth. Rome added traditions as a necessary complement to Scripture. They believe these additional

revelation are passed down through the pronouncements of popes and councils. The Anabaptist on the other hand swung to the extreme. Most would reject the conclusions of ancient creeds including those that are based on necessarily consequences from the Scriptures. At the same time, ironically, many had a low view of Scripture and look for all sorts of inner light and extra-biblical special revelations.

Today, the situation has not changed. Rome remains enamelled to their traditions including those which have no biblical foundations. At the same time, there is a whole range of professing Christians who are supposedly Protestants ranging from shallow-evangelicals to Charismatics to liberals who do not honestly subscribe to the doctrine of the all-sufficiency of Scripture. Some believe in extrabiblical revelation from dreams to intuition to actual word of knowledge. Some reject miracles and anything that appear to contradict modern scientific opinions such as evolution. Some claim to believe the Scriptures but pick and choose what is convenient and acceptable to whoever is broadly Christian. Thus we find most having no qualms about innovations in worship or using the Sabbath like any other days.

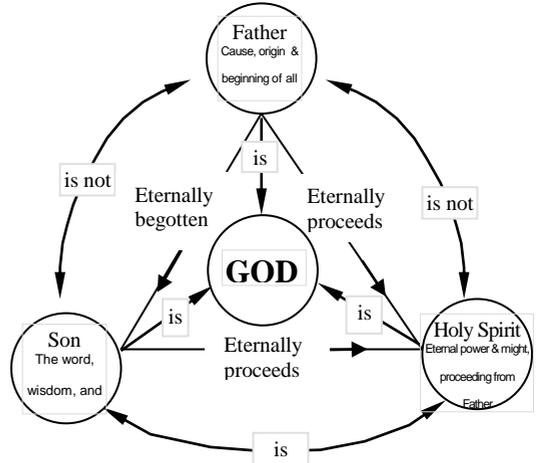
What is the correct view? The correct view is expressed somewhat in the BC article we are studying. We believe that the divine scripture is the sufficient, authoritative and infallible rule for our faith and life. As such, every idea, opinion, doctrine and practice must be measured against the Scriptures. We do not reject all traditions, creeds and opinions of men. *"We reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with"* Scriptures. We have a high regard for what our fathers in the faith, especially our Reformed Fathers have said. But that is because they have proven themselves to be generally consistent with the Scripture. That notwithstanding, it behoves us to prove their opinions against the Scripture and to hold fast only to that which is consistent with the Word of God (1Th 5:21).

We also have a high view of Creeds and Confessions, but again this is because we believe that the Holy Spirit is not only given to us, but to His ministers throughout the ages. As such when the faithful ministers get together to frame the Confessions, we can have great confidence that they are consistent with Scriptures. We may as such adopt a "berean spirit" when using the creeds. We should receive them with all readiness of heart and search the Scriptures to see if what is confessed is true.

## Article VIII

# God Is One in Essence, Yet Distinguished in Three Persons

According to this truth and this Word of God, we believe in one only God, who is the one single essence, in which are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties; namely, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is the cause, origin, and beginning of all things visible and invisible; the Son is the word, wisdom, and image of the Father; the Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might, proceeding from the Father and the Son.



Nevertheless, God is not by this distinction divided into three, since the Holy Scriptures teach us that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit have each His personality, distinguished by Their properties; but in such wise that these three persons are but one only God.

Hence, then, it is evident that the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father, and likewise the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Nevertheless, these persons thus distinguished are not divided, nor intermixed; for the Father has not assumed the flesh, nor has the Holy Spirit, but the Son only. The Father has never been without His Son, or without His Holy Spirit. For They are all three co-eternal and co-essential. There is neither first nor last; for They are, all three, one, in truth, in power, in godness, and in mercy.

## Comment

God has revealed himself in His Word as Triune. He is one in substance or existence, but three in persons or subsistence. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* states this verity most beautifully in the words: “There are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, same in substance, equal in power and glory” (WSC 6). The present article that we are considering and the next three, flesh out this truth. In this article it is simply stated with some elaboration. In BC 9, the doctrine is proven from Scripture. In BC 10, the deity of the Christ is affirmed and demonstrated from Scriptures; whereas in BC 11, the deity of the Holy Spirit is simply stated.

One of the best ways to appreciate the doctrine of the Trinity is to view it

diagrammatically. In this diagram, the ideas of eternal generation of the Son (represented by the term “eternally begotten”) and eternal procession of the Holy Spirit (represented by “eternally proceeds”) are confessed in *BC* 10 & 11. Otherwise, every-thing else is found in the present article.

The terms used to describe the Persons of the Godhead are all from the Scripture. For example, of the Father, the Scripture says that He is “the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein” (Acts 14:15). Furthermore, Paul confesses: “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28); “But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things” (1Cor 8:6a); “All things are of God” (2 Cor 5:18); and that it is God the Father “who quickeneth all things” (1 Tim 6:13).

Likewise, concerning the Son of God, the Scripture informs us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1). In the same vein, the apostle Paul declares that Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature” (Col 1:15) and that unto them which are called Christ is “the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1Cor 1:24).

As for the Holy Spirit, the Scripture frequently attributes God’s power and might to Him (e.g. Zech 4:6; Lk 4:1; Eph 3:16 and Mic 3:8).

We will see more of the proof of doctrine of the Trinity when we look at the next article, but for now it is sufficient to notice how the Scripture acknowledges the existence of only one God, and yet speaks of three distinct persons in the Godhead. God Himself says: “I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me” (Isa 45:5; cf. Dt 4:34, 39; 6:4; Is 45:6, etc). Yet when the Son was baptised, we see the Father declaring from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17); and at the same time, we see the Spirit descending like a dove (Mt 3:16). Elsewhere, we see the Son praying to the Father (Jn 17), and the Father and the Son sending the Spirit (Jn 14:26; 15:26). And then when the Lord Jesus taught the baptismal formal He teaches us that we are to baptise “in the name [not names] of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Mt 28:19).

All these testify of how the three persons in the Godhead though “*distinguished are not divided, nor intermixed.*” They also suggest that the three persons are “*co-eternal and co-essential*” and they three are “*one, in truth, in power, in goodness, and in mercy.*”

	<b>Father</b>	<b>Son</b>	<b>Holy Spirit</b>
<b>Called God</b>	<i>Phil 1:2</i>	<i>Jn 1:1, 14; Col 2:9</i>	<i>Acts 5:3-4</i>

<b>Omnipotent</b>	<i>Isa 64:8; 44:24</i>	<i>Jn 1:3; Col 1:15–17</i>	<i>Job 33:4; 26:13</i>
<b>Omnipresent</b>	<i>1 Kgs 8:27</i>	<i>Mt 28:20</i>	<i>Ps 139:7-10</i>
<b>Omniscient</b>	<i>1 Jn 3:20</i>	<i>Jn 16:30; 21:17</i>	<i>1 Cor 2:10-11</i>

## Article IX

# The Proof of the Foregoing Article of the Trinity of Persons in One God

*All this we know as well from the testimonies of Holy Writ as from their operations, and chiefly by those we feel in ourselves. The testimonies of the Holy Scriptures that teach us to believe this Holy Trinity are written in many places of the Old Testament, which are not so necessary to enumerate as to choose them out with discretion and judgment.*

*In Genesis, chap. 1:26, 27, God says: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, etc. And God created man in his own image, male and female created he them. And Gen. 3:22, Behold, the man is become as one of us. From this saying, Let us make man in our image, it appears that there are more persons than one in the Godhead; and when He says, God created, He signifies the unity. It is true, He does not say how many persons there are, but that which appears to us somewhat obscure in the Old Testament is very plain in the New. For when our Lord was baptized in Jordan, the voice of the Father was heard, saying, This is my beloved Son; the Son was seen in the water, and the Holy Spirit appeared in the shape of a dove. This form is also instituted by Christ in the baptism of all believers: Make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel of Luke the angel Gabriel thus addressed Mary, the mother of our Lord: The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; wherefore also the holy thing which is begotten shall be called the Son of God. Likewise: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. And (A.V.): There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.*

*In all these places we are fully taught that there are three persons in one only divine essence. And although this doctrine far surpasses all human understanding, nevertheless we now believe it by means of the Word of God, but expect hereafter to enjoy the perfect knowledge and benefit thereof in heaven.*

*Moreover, we must observe the particular offices and operations of these three persons towards us. The Father is called our Creator, by His power; the Son is our Savior and Redeemer, by His blood; the Holy Spirit is our Sanctifier, by His dwelling in our hearts.*

*This doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been affirmed and maintained by the true Church since the time of the apostles to this very day against the Jews, Mohammedans, and some false Christians and heretics, as Marcion, Manes, Praxeas, Sabellius, Samosatenus, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. Therefore, in this point, we do willingly receive the three creeds, namely, that of the Apostles, of Nicea, and of Athanasius; likewise that which, conformable thereunto, is agreed upon by the ancient fathers.*

## Comment

The living and true God whom we worship is triune. There are three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one God, same in substance, equal in power and glory. But why do we believe this profoundly unique doctrine? We believe it,—as the present article suggests,—because the Scripture teaches it, and because our experience confirms it.

Our experience confirms it, no doubt, because the Holy Spirit working in our heart enables to know and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour (cf. Gal 5:22) and, at the same time, to recognise God the Father as our “Abba Father” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6).

But much more objective than our religious experience is the testimony of Scriptures both in the Old and New Testaments.

A systematic way of proving the doctrine of the Trinity from the Scriptures would require us to show: (1) There is one only one living and true God (cf. Jer 10:10, Isa 45:5); (2) There are multiple persons in the Godhead (cf. Gen 1:26-27; Mt 3:16-17); (3) The Father is God (cf. Mt 6:9; Jn 17:1); (4) The Son is God (Jn 1:1; 1 Tim 3:16; Col 2:9); (5) The Holy Spirit is God (cf. Act 5:3, 4); and (6) The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is one God (cf. Mt 28:19).

Proposition #1 is dealt with in *BC* 1; Proposition #3 is hardly ever questioned; Proposition #4 & 5 will be dealt with in the next two articles. The present article, as such, focuses on Propositions #2 & 6.

In this regard, the first person plural pronouns attributed to God’s deliberation in regard to the Creation and Fall of man clearly indicates that there are more persons in the unity of the Godhead. It is true that we do not have, here or anywhere in the Old Testament, a clear indication of how many persons there are in the Godhead (Isaiah 61:1 only becomes clear if interpreted against New Testament revelation). However, what is concealed in the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. The account of the Lord Jesus’ baptism clearly indicates that there are three distinct persons in the Godhead and not three modes of manifestation of God. Likewise, the words of the Angel Gabriel to Mary about the conception of the holy Child, Jesus (Lk 1:35) affirms the same.

Again the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost is demonstrated in the baptism formula appointed by the Lord and also in the trinitarian benediction of the apostle Paul (1 Cor 13:14). Likewise, appeal may be made to 1 John 5:7 as is done in the present article. The authenticity of this verse is disputed by many scholars as there are no Greek

manuscripts dated prior to the 16th century that contain this verse in its entirety. There are, however, Latin manuscripts from the second century that contain it, and also numerous patristic allusions to it. Thus we cannot conclude that it was not in the autographa. And in any case, the truth that is contained in it is clearly taught in many other passages in Scriptures.

Moreover, as the present article affirms, the three Persons of the Godhead are presented in the Scriptures as having distinct roles in our creation and redemption. *“The Father is called our Creator, by His power; the Son is our Saviour and Redeemer, by His blood; the Holy Spirit is our Sanctifier, by His dwelling in our hearts.”* This describes what theologians call, “the Economic Trinity” which is of course based on “the Ontological Trinity” which we have been discussing.

All said, we may conclude as does the present article that the doctrine of the Triunity of God is founded upon Scriptural revelation and as such distinguishes between the living and true God of the Bible and the gods of man’s imagination. As such we must insist that the gods of Islam, of the Jews (who remain unconverted), of Liberalism, of heretics and of cults such as Jehovah Witness and Mormons are simply not the same as the God of the Bible whom we worship. This we affirm even if it is claimed that their doctrine of God is derived from the same or variations of the same Scriptures. Conversely, we acknowledge and receive with the true Church of Christ throughout the ages the three ancient ecumenical creeds, namely, the Apostles’ Creed<sup>1</sup>, the Nicene Creed<sup>2</sup> (AD 325) and the Athanasian Creed<sup>3</sup> as being true to the Word of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Contrary to popular belief, the *Apostles’ Creed* is not written by the apostles though it is possible that it was compiled out of catechetical materials prepared by the apostles and their students. The basic form of this creeds appears to have been in use since the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, whereas the present form most probably dates back to the early 6<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest form of this creed was adopted by the Council of Nicea (AD 325) over against the heresy of Arianism, which teaches that Christ is not fully God. This creed was revised by the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), with a statement regarding the Holy Spirit. The Western Church then added the article on the Procession of the Holy Spirit as being also from the Son. This was adopted in the Council of Toledo (AD 589)

<sup>3</sup> The *Athanasian Creed* is also not written by Athanasius, the great defender of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity against the heretic Arius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It was written as much as three centuries later by an unknown author, but was accepted by the church. Its final article reads, “This is the Catholic [i.e. universal] Faith: which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved.”

## Article X

# Jesus Christ Is True and Eternal God

*We believe that Jesus Christ according to His divine nature is the only begotten Son of God, begotten from eternity, not made, nor created (for then He would be a creature), but co-essential and co-eternal with the Father, the very image of his substance and the effulgence of his glory, equal unto Him in all things. He is the Son of God, not only from the time that He assumed our nature but from all eternity, as these testimonies, when compared together, teach us. Moses says that God created the world; and St. John says that all things were made by that Word which he calls God. The apostle says that God made the world by His Son; likewise, that God created all things by Jesus Christ. Therefore it must needs follow that He who is called God, the Word, the Son, and Jesus Christ, did exist at that time when all things were created by Him. Therefore the prophet Micah says: His goings forth are from of old, from everlasting. And the apostle: He hath neither beginning of days nor end of life. He therefore is that true, eternal, and almighty God whom we invoke, worship, and serve.*

### **Comment**

Jesus Christ is one person with two natures, divine and human. This doctrine will be covered in Articles XVIII & XIX. However, the deity of the Christ is an essential verity upon which the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity of God is founded. Therefore, it must be affirmed and demonstrated first.

The first chapter of John is one of the most important chapters in the Bible to teach us about the deity of Christ. The chapter begins essentially by declaring that He is God:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1).

In these words,—which we believe to be correctly translated in our version and a host of scholarly translations, contra the New World Translation of the Jehovah Witnesses,—we are clearly taught that Christ has always existed as the revelation of God and that He is God himself. Christ is the Word of God. We may know God only through Him.

The chapter goes on to teach us that He is the “*only begotten of the Father*” (v. 14); and that “*all things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made*” (v. 3; cf. Heb 1:2; Eph 3:9). Since all things were made by him, “*it is manifest that he is excepted*” (1 Cor 15:27), which did create all things! He is not a creature. He is the Creator!

Putting these thoughts together we are forced to conclude that though Christ is begotten of the Father, He was “*begotten from eternity*”, or more

precisely, eternally begotten, so that there never was a time when He was not. *“He is the Son of God, not only from the time that He assumed our nature but from all eternity.”* This truth is clearly taught by the Prophet Micah in his prophecy about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, where he declares that his “goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting” (Mic 5:9). Likewise it is affirmed in Hebrews 7:3, that Melchizedek typified Him for he has “neither beginning of days, nor end of life.”

And since he is declared to be God not only here but in a number passages in Scriptures (e.g. Ps 45:6; Heb 1:8; Isa 9:6; 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Jn 5:20; Col 2:9 etc), we must conclude that He is *“co-essential and co-eternal with the Father.”* “[He], being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God” says the Apostle Paul (Phil 2:6). And says the apostle to the Hebrews, He is “the brightness of [the Father’s] glory, and the express image of his person” (Heb 1:3). This is what the present article re-stating by saying that he is *“the very image of his substance and the effulgence of his glory, equal unto Him in all things.”*

It is thus with the firm confidence and conviction that we can confess per the last statement in this article that the Lord Jesus Christ is none other than *“that true, eternal, and almighty God whom we invoke, worship, and serve.”* This we affirm without reservation even though we usually address the Father,—He being the first Person and representative in the Godhead,—in our prayer and worship.

## Article XI

# The Holy Spirit Is True and Eternal God

*We believe and confess also that the Holy Spirit from eternity proceeds from the Father and the Son; and therefore neither is made, created, nor begotten, but only proceeds from both; who in order is the third person of the Holy Trinity; of one and the same essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son; and therefore is the true and eternal God, as the Holy Scriptures teach us.*

### **Comment**

It is remarkable that while the biblical proof for the deity of Christ is woven into the previous article where the doctrine is confessed, little by way of proof is offered in the present article. But this neglect must not be construed as a lack of conviction on the part of the framer of the confession, or on the part of those who confess the same. The apparent omission is probably due to the fact that objections to the doctrine of the deity of the Holy Spirit were not as prominently and frequently raised as objections to the doctrine of the full deity of Christ. This was true in the days when the Belgic Confession was written. It remained true when the Westminster Assembly met, so that there is not even a separate article on the Holy Spirit in the Westminster Standards.

The present article as such simply states the orthodox doctrine of the equality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son as well as His eternity and eternal procession from both the Father and the Son.

This latter verity was not fully affirmed creedally by the Church until the 6th century.

The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son was taught by Athanasius and became part of the Nicene Creed in A.D. 325. The doctrine of the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, became part of the Creed in two steps.

First, in the Council of Constantinople, in A.D. 381, the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325 was enlarged to include a paragraph on the Holy Spirit:

*And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified...*

Then, secondly, at the Council of Toledo, A.D. 589, the Latin Church added the word 'filioque' (Latin for "and the Son") to the phrase "who proceedeth from the Father," so that the Holy Spirit is now said to proceed from both the Father and the Son as confessed in the present article.

We believe that “the Holy Scriptures teach us” these truths. But how?

In the first place, the word ‘Spirit’ (j'Wr, ruach in the OT and pneu`ma, pneuma in the NT) when used in a genitive construct with God or the Lord (Spirit of God, or Spirit of the Lord), suggests a breath proceeding from God or the Lord.

In the second place, the Lord describes the Holy Spirit as the “Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father” (Jn 15:26). The word “proceedeth” (ejkporeuomai, ekporeuomai) is in the present middle indicative, indicating perpetual or continuing “action,” upon the subject (i.e. the Spirit) Himself.

In the third place, the Holy Spirit is known in the Scriptures as “Spirit of [God’s] Son” (Gal 4:6) and “the Spirit of Christ” (Rom 8:9, 1 Pet 1:11), which suggests quite strongly that the Spirit does not only proceed from the Father, but also the Son.

But now, the question may be asked as to whether this doctrine of eternal procession of the Spirit is really that important that it should be part of the Confession. Many modern theologians do not think so. Some have even abandoned it altogether. However, it should be noted that it is important because firstly, it is part of God’s self-revelation. Granted it is not explicitly stated in Scripture in the manner that it is stated in the creeds. But there appears to be no consistent way to interpret those verses from which the doctrine is derived to state in the manner it is stated in the Creeds. And secondly, the doctrine is important because it really guards the orthodox doctrine of the Triunity of God against both the error of tri-theism and the error of contradiction. It is for these reasons we would not hesitate to confess our belief in regard to the Holy Spirit in the words of the present article.

## Article XII

# The Creation of All Things, Especially the Angels

*We believe that the Father by the Word, that is, by His Son, has created of nothing the heaven, the earth, and all creatures, when it seemed good unto Him; giving unto every creature its being, shape, form, and several offices to serve its Creator; that He also still upholds and governs them by His eternal providence and infinite power for the service of mankind, to the end that man may serve his God.*

*He also created the angels good, to be His messengers and to serve His elect; some of whom are fallen from that excellency in which God created them into everlasting perdition, and the others have by the grace of God remained steadfast and continued in their first state. The devils and evil spirits are so depraved that they are enemies of God and every good thing; to the utmost of their power as murderers watching to ruin the Church and every member thereof, and by their wicked stratagems to destroy all; and are, therefore, by their own wickedness adjudged to eternal damnation, daily expecting their horrible torments.*

*Therefore we reject and abhor the error of the Sadducees, who deny the existence of spirits and angels; and also that of the Manichees, who assert that the devils have their origin of themselves, and that they are wicked of their own nature, without having been corrupted.*

### Comment

The focus of the present article is on God's work of creation, of which several truths are emphasised.

First, it is noted that Creation is primarily attributed to the Father, the first Person of the Trinity (1 Cor 8:6), just as Justification is primarily attributed to the Son and Sanctification to the Spirit.

Secondly, we are reminded that the Father created "*by the Word, that is, by His Son.*" This is what the apostle to the Hebrew tells us when he says: "[God] hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, whom He hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds" (Heb 1:2). This is of course not to deny the involvement of the Holy Spirit, which taught elsewhere in Scriptures (Job 26:13a; Ps 104:30).

Thirdly, we are given to affirm that God "*created of nothing,*" i.e. ex nihilo. Again, the apostle to the Hebrews remind us: "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Heb 11:3).

Fourthly, we are given to confess that God created "*the heaven, the earth, and all creatures.*" That is to say, God created everything visible and invisible, inanimate and animate. Heaven with all its inhabitants was

probably created on the first day together with the entire physical realm with the earth, covered in water and suspended in space (cf. Gen 1:1, 6; Job 38:4). Light or electromagnetic waves was also created on this first day. The rest of creation in physical space was brought into existence over the next 5 days. On the second day, God created an atmosphere for the earth. On the third day, He created dry land on the earth, and thus form the ocean and seas. He also brought forth vegetation on the earth. On the fourth day, He created the galaxies, the sun, the moon and the planets in space. On the fifth day, he made all marine and aquatic animals, and birds. On the sixth day, he made all the rest of the land dwelling animals including insects. He also made Adam and Eve on this day.

Fifthly, we are given to confess that everything that was created is upheld and governed by the eternal providence and infinite power of God *“to the end that man may serve his God.”* To put it in another way, the purpose of all creation was to provide a place for man or more specifically God’s elect, to dwell in so that they may glorify and enjoy God.

Sixthly, we are given to affirm that everything which God created was good at the beginning. This is especially so for angels. And angels do exist contrary to the doctrine of the Sadducees or the Liberals of our own day. Angels were created to be God’s messengers and to serve His elect.

How is it then that there are demons? The Manicheans or Gnostics which had influence on some sections of the early Church contended that good and evil existed alongside each other right from the beginning. But the Scripture teaches rather that demons are angels which have fallen from their first estate. We read in Jude 6—“And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.” These angels have been cast into hell, though their chain is, as it were, long enough today to allow them to continue to cause trouble to the Church of Christ, and if it be possible to destroy her.

Thankfully, a multitude of the angelic host were kept from falling. These will continue to serve God and His elect faithfully for all eternity.

## Article XIII

# The Providence of God and His Government of All Things

*We believe that the same good God, after He had created all things, did not forsake them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that He rules and governs them according to His holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without His appointment; nevertheless, God neither is the Author of nor can be charged with the sins which are committed. For His power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that He orders and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even then when devils and wicked men act unjustly. And as to what He does surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire into farther than our capacity will admit of; but with the greatest humility and reverence adore the righteous judgments of God, which are hid from us, contenting ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, to learn only those things which He has revealed to us in His Word, without transgressing these limits.*

*This doctrine affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father; who watches over us with a paternal care, keeping all creatures so under His power that not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father, in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded that He so restrains the devil and all our enemies that without His will and permission they cannot hurt us.*

*And therefore we reject that damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God regards nothing but leaves all things to chance.*

### **Comment**

Practically all who profess to believe in the existence of God, believe that He created the world. These would include Christians and non-Christians. All who are true Christians will believe that He created they world. They may differ in terms of the mechanics and time taken to create, but they will agree that He made everything. Those who wholeheartedly believe in the biblical testimony would, no doubt, confess that He created the world in 6 literal days, but others would rather believe that He took millions or billions of years to do so. Yet they would all agree that He is the Creator.

Strangely, however, when it comes to what happened after God created the world, the biblical doctrine of God's providence is denied by many even amongst those who profess to believe that He is the Creator. These would assert that God created and then stood back and left all things to continue according to their nature, or according to chance, as some would put it. So God might know what is going to happen, but He is not really in control unless He chooses to intervene by way of a miracle. Indeed, some

(e.g. the Open-Theists) would even suggest that God could be surprised at how things turn out on the way to the end which He has ordained.

What is the biblical doctrine? The biblical doctrine is that God is in sovereign control of everything. As the present article puts it: *“after He had created all things, did not forsake them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that He rules and governs them according to His holy will.”* Nothing in this world happens without God’s appointment and providential hand. The apostle Paul is clearly expressing this doctrine when he asserts that it is “in Him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). But the Lord Jesus himself is even clearer when He asserts that “not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father” (cf. Mt 10:29-30).

It is clear that as far as the biblical testimony goes, God is the primary cause for the being and motion of all things. He has not only decreed all things that come to pass; He created all things; and He sees to it that all things happen according to His plan. This is according to His own declaration:

“I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure” (Isa 46:9-10).

But the immediate question that we must ask is: What about the actions of rational creatures such as man and angels? In particular, does that not mean that man does not make any real choices; and that when man sins, God is responsible?

Well, to answer this question, we must insist, as we are given in this article to confess, that God is *“neither... the Author of nor can [He] be charged with the sins which are committed.”* Yes, God is the primary cause even in the sinful actions of man, but God is perfectly good and remains perfectly righteous even though sinful man is unable to act sinfully or in any way apart from the causal power of the providential hand of God. Or to put it confessionally: *“His power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that He orders and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even then when devils and wicked men act unjustly”* (cf. Jas 1:13).

How do we explain the apparent contradiction? Well, suffice to say that while God ordains and brings to pass all things that come to pass, an act is sinful only if it is willed by a rational creature. And the choices of rational creatures are made without any consideration or knowledge of the remote

or primary cause effecting them. Therefore rational creatures are held responsible for their choices. Sin is sin only when a rational creature chooses to act wickedly. God ordains that a man slays another; but whether it is sin depends on whether the slayer slays out of malice.

This explains how God can ordain all actions and yet not be the author of sin. But what about our thoughts? Are our thoughts also ordained and brought to pass providentially? If so, how can God bring about the thought and not be responsible for it? On this, we can surmise, but we cannot fully explain. It *“surpass[es] human understanding”* and is beyond *“our capacity.”* But as it is revealed as a fact in the word of God, and we have no reason to believe that it is contradictory even if it is difficult to understand, we must receive it and confess it with *“greatest humility and reverence.”*

When we do so, we find *“unspeakable consolation”* and are given the assurance that God is, by His fatherly care and love toward us, bringing all things to pass by His sovereign power for our good and for His own glory. Nothing and no one, however great or small, can hurt us without God’s will and permission.

## Article XIV

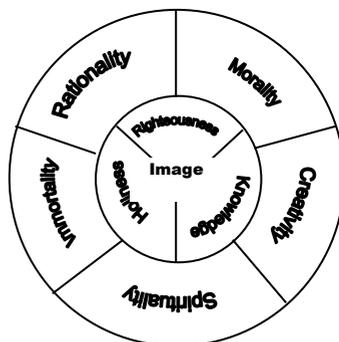
*The Creation and Fall of Man, and His Incapacity to Perform What Is Truly Good. We believe that God created man out of the dust of the earth, and made and formed him after His own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will agreeably to the will of God. But being in honour, he understood it not, neither knew his excellency, but wilfully subjected himself to sin and consequently to death and the curse, giving ear to the words of the devil. For the commandment of life, which he had received, he transgressed; and by sin separated himself from God, who was his true life; having corrupted his whole nature; whereby he made himself liable to corporal and spiritual death. And being thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God, and retained only small remains thereof, which, however, are sufficient to leave man without excuse; for all the light which is in us is changed into darkness, as the Scriptures teach us, saying: The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness apprehended it not; where St. John calls men darkness.*

*Therefore we reject all that is taught repugnant to this concerning the free will of man, since man is but a slave to sin, and can receive nothing, except it have been given him from heaven. For who may presume to boast that he of himself can do any good, since Christ says: No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him? Who will glory in his own will, who understands that the mind of the flesh is enmity against God? Who can speak of his knowledge, since the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God? In short, who dares suggest any thought, since he knows that we are not sufficient of ourselves to account anything as of ourselves, but that our sufficiency is of God? And therefore what the apostle says ought justly to be held sure and firm, that God worketh in us both to will and to work, for his good pleasure. For there is no understanding nor will conformable to the divine understanding and will but what Christ has wrought in man; which He teaches us, when He says: Apart from me ye can do nothing.*

### Comments

Man is created in the image of God in knowledge, righteousness and true holiness (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). As such he was originally “good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will agreeably to the will of God.” But the first man, Adam, fell under the temptation of the devil, and so died spiritually and began the process of physical death as God had warned (Gen 2:17). He “corrupted his whole nature” and being “thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God.” All men descending from Adam by natural generation sinned in him and fell with him, and so since then, “there is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God” (Rom 3:10-11). They have, in other words, lost righteousness, knowledge and holiness. We may say that the image of God in them is obliterated, though they remain bearers of God’s

image having morality, spirituality, rationality, immortality and creativity. This is reflected in the present article in the words *“and retained only small remains thereof, which, however, are sufficient to leave man without excuse.”* We may say that what is left is simply the imprint of the original righteousness, knowledge and holiness. Man can no longer do or think with perfect righteousness. Every thing he does is now tainted with sin even when he may feel he has good intentions. Likewise, man no longer retains true knowledge of God and His Law. Only the works of the law remains in his heart (Rom 2:14). Thus, he senses that it is wrong to steal or to murder, but he no longer appreciates these commandments as being absolute law given by God and applicable in all areas of life. He is ready to justify breaking of them without so much as his conscience pricking him. In the same way, man has lost “true holiness.” He retains a sense that there is a spiritual realm and that he must worship someone or something, but he has no inclination to seek after the living and true God, nor to live for His glory.



These *“small remains”* are sufficient to leave man without excuse, but not sufficient to be described even as a spark of light in the heart. It is all darkness.

Man has become a slave to sin. He is incapable of doing anything good in the eyes of God. He cannot even go to God or worship him unless he is powerfully drawn by the Spirit of God in regeneration (Jn 6:37).

He continues to choose to do what his heart or mind tells him is most beneficial. However, his mind has been darkened and his heart is wholly inclined to sin. As such his will is completely in bondage to sin.

Only when a man is regenerated and given a new heart will he become capable of doing any good which is acceptable in the sight of God. This is why the Lord Jesus teaches us that apart from Him we can do nothing. We are by nature totally depraved and cannot please God unless we are justified by the blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit dwells in our heart to enlighten our understanding (cf. 1Cor 2:14)

## Article XV

### Original Sin

*We believe that through the disobedience of Adam original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature and a hereditary disease, wherewith even infants in their mothers womb are infected, and which produces in man all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof, and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind. Nor is it altogether abolished or wholly eradicated even by regeneration; since sin always issues forth from this woeful source, as water from a fountain; notwithstanding it is not imputed to the children of God unto condemnation, but by His grace and mercy is forgiven them. Not that they should rest securely in sin, but that a sense of this corruption should make believers often to sigh, desiring to be delivered from this body of death.*

*Wherefore we reject the error of the Pelagians, who assert that sin proceeds only from imitation.*

### Comments

There is a common thinking that babies are born innocent or even good by nature. This idea could have arisen from observing human babies, for they do look innocent and harmless! It is not surprising, therefore, that even amongst professing Christians there are those who insist that this is correct despite the clear teaching of Scripture that all men descending from Adam by natural generation sinned in him and fell with him (Rom 5:15ff), and therefore all human babies are conceived in sin (Ps 51:5). There is even a term to describe the heresy. It is called Pelagianism after a 4th century heretic named Pelagius, whose doctrine was strongly opposed by the church father, Augustine. The followers of Pelagius “assert that sin proceeds only from imitation.”

The Scripture and Reformed orthodoxy, on the other hand, assert that sin proceeds from a sinful heart, which is inherited from Adam. The Lord Jesus himself says, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, &c” (Mt 15:21-23). And Paul says: “As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom 5:12).

This “*corruption of the whole nature*” and “*hereditary disease*” is referred to as “*Original Sin*” in the present article of the Belgic Confession. It should be noted, however, in the definition of the Westminster Standards, “*Original Sin*” consists in “*the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature*” (WSC 18). While the want of original righteousness may be implicitly included in the present

article, it is not so clear that imputed guilt of Adam is included.

Nevertheless, it is true that actual sin flows more directly from corruption rather than from guilt; and also this corruption is *“so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind.”* That is to say, in the present article, fallen man is regarded as guilty because of the corruption of original sin, rather than because of imputed guilt of Adam. But either way, we confess together that in the eyes of God, there is none righteous amongst man from the moment of conception apart from Christ Jesus, the God-Man.

What about believers? Does regeneration abolish original corruption? Well, it is true that in regeneration, the image of God in us is restored (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10), but it is also clear that it is not completely restored since the regenerate man continues to sin, or as we are given to confess in this article: *“since sin always issues forth from this woeful source, as water from a fountain.”*

There is a difference, however, between the regenerate and the unregenerate, or perhaps more accurately, between the elect and the reprobate. In the case of the reprobate, original sin is *“imputed... unto condemnation.”* The elect, on the other hand, has original sin imputed,— and a remnant left remaining even after they are regenerated,— not to condemn them, but so that they may know the grace and mercy of God. Of course, the fact that they are not condemned for their sin should not make them spiritually complacent but rather make them *“to sigh, desiring to be delivered from this body of death.”* This was the experience of the apostle Paul, who after lamenting his struggles against sin cried out:

“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin” (Rom 7:24-25).

## Article XVI

### Eternal Election

*We believe that, all the posterity of Adam being thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of our first parents, God then did manifest Himself such as He is; that is to say, merciful and just: merciful, since He delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom He in His eternal and unchangeable counsel of mere goodness has elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works; just, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves.*

#### Comments

The doctrine of election and reprobation is clearly taught in the Scriptures (cf. Rom 9:1-24). In *“His eternal and unchangeable counsel of mere goodness”* God has decreed that there should be a people made in His image who would enjoy and glorify Him with hearts filled with the experience of His exclusive (or particular) grace, mercy and love. For this purpose, God must decree their redemption in Christ, their fall into sin with mankind, as well as the creation of mankind, and the world that they must live in.

These whom God would save are known as the elect. The apostle Paul speaks of how they have been “predestinated... unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will ... In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph 1:5, 11 cf. Mt 11:25–26; Jn 15:16, 19).

But in order that they may know that God is indeed gracious, merciful and loving, it is necessary that there be those whom He does not show grace, mercy and love, but justice and hatred. These are the reprobate. These are those whom God will condemn by *“leaving [them] in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves.”* Paul refers to these as “the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction” that God might “shew his wrath” (Rom 9:22).

In the present article, we are given to confess this doctrine of eternal election and reprobation, from the perspective of the outworking of God’s decree in history rather than from that of God’s plan in eternity.

From this standpoint, we see *“all the posterity of Adam”* (descending from him by natural generation) falling *“into perdition and ruin by the sin of our first parents.”* Then we see God displaying His mercy and justice.

His mercy is manifested in His delivering and preserving from perdition through Christ Jesus all His elect. And that they may know it is entirely of

God's grace and mercy, He made it that they are redeemed "*without any respect to their works.*" As Paul puts it, "[God] hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (2 Tim 1:9). "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace" (Rom 11:5–6).

But conversely, God also manifests His justice by dealing with the reprobate strictly according to what they deserve for their guilt, namely, eternal punishment. Let none, however, imagine that God deals unfairly or unjustly with the elect. God is holy, just and righteous. He cannot be anything but just; and justice demands that He punishes every sin. How then does He show mercy and grace to the elect? He does so by pouring out the fullness of His wrath to punish to the full extent their covenant head, Christ Jesus. This is what we shall see in the subsequent two articles.

## Article XVII

# The Recovery of Fallen Man

*We believe that our most gracious God, in His admirable wisdom and goodness, seeing that man had thus thrown himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself wholly miserable, was pleased to seek and comfort him, when he trembling fled from His presence, promising him that He would give His Son (who would be born of a woman) to bruise the head of the serpent and to make him blessed.*

### Comment

Our first father Adam fell into sin by partaking of the forbidden fruit. He, therefore, immediately incurred the threatened judgement of God and suffered death—physical and spiritual. Physically he was as good as dead and was living on borrowed time. The countdown to the day of his death began and he began to experience the process of ageing albeit quite subtly. Spiritually, he became “dead in trespasses and sin” (Eph 2:1). He could no longer do anything good and pleasing in God’s sight. All his righteousness became but filthy rags in God’s sight (Isa 64:6). Therefore, he also began to experience eternal death, or separation from God (contra eternal life of knowing and enjoying God, Jn 17:3). Instead of enjoy the love of God and having communion with him, Adam now suffered the wrath of God and fled from Him in fear and enmity. Instead of joy and peace, he is now filled with guilt, misery and pain. He had “*made himself wholly miserable.*”

What was true for Adam is true for all his posterity by natural generation, for we all sin in him and fell with him (Rom 5:12).

But remarkably, our most gracious God did not leave Adam to wallow in sin, nor did He withhold mercy.

After he fell, Adam full of guilt and fear, fled from the presence of the Lord sought to hide himself amongst the trees of the garden (Gen 3:8). But God graciously, and “*in His admirable wisdom and goodness*” sought him out. He admonished Him, and then amongst other things, promised “*him that He would give His Son (who would be born of a woman) to bruise the head of the serpent and to make him blessed.*”

This promise is expressed in what is commonly called the protoevangelion, the first giving of the gospel, Genesis 3:15—

And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

No doubt, the seed of the woman refers to Christ. He would crush the head of the serpent, the devil, by laying down His life to suffer and die for His people as a propitiatory sacrifice. God, no doubt, elaborated on this when He clothed Adam and Eve with animal skin. The animal had to be slain to provide the covering. Though we are not told, it is not difficult to infer that God would have explained to them the symbolism. No doubt, Adam would have taught his sons Cain and Abel the same hope as he instructed them to worship God with animal sacrifices to represent the Messiah who was to come.

Now, what God did for Adam, by seeking him out, we see Him doing for His elect. Thus in a certain sense, the act of God seeking Adam out foreshadowed His seeking out His elect out of His wisdom and goodness. This is perhaps the reason why the present article speaks of God as seeking and comforting man rather than Adam. The message that God was conveying to Adam, He conveys to all of Adam's seed who would be able to receive it. These are the elect.

This reference to God seeking man must not be interpreted as affirming a desire of God to save all mankind, for that would be read what is not intended into the article, and to affirm a promise of God to send Christ to die for all mankind to make all mankind blessed, which would then contradict the doctrine of Limited Atonement which is alluded to in Article 12 of this Confession. The present makes no reference to the elect. But the Scriptures is clear that Christ will lay his life down for his sheep, and he seeks only his lost sheep (cf. Jn 10:15, Lk 15:4). And such as he seeks, he will save. Such is the admirable wisdom and goodness of our gracious God.

## Article XVIII

# The Incarnation of Jesus Christ

*We confess, therefore, that God has fulfilled the promise which He made to the fathers by the mouth of His holy prophets, when He sent into the world, at the time appointed by Him, His own only-begotten and eternal Son, who took upon Him the form of a servant and became like unto man, really assuming the true human nature with all its infirmities, sin excepted; being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit without the means of man; and did not only assume human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, that He might be a real man. For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary that He should take both upon Him, to save both.*

*Therefore we confess (in opposition to the heresy of the Anabaptists, who deny that Christ assumed human flesh of His mother) that Christ partook of the flesh and blood of the children; that He is a fruit of the loins of David after the flesh; born of the seed of David according to the flesh; a fruit of the womb of Mary; born of a woman; a branch of David; a shoot of the root of Jesse; sprung from the tribe of Judah; descended from the Jews according to the flesh; of the seed of Abraham, since he took on him the seed of Abraham, and was made like unto his brethren in all things, sin excepted; so that in truth He is our IMMANUEL, that is to say, God with us.*

### Comment

We noted in the previous article, how God promised Adam *“that He would give His Son (who would be born of a woman) to bruise the head of the serpent and to make him blessed.”* In the present article we are given to confess how that promise was fulfilled.

Finite man had sinned against infinite God in the Fall of Adam. The only way to redeem man is to have another Adam to undo the damage. This second Adam must not only pay for the guilt of the first Adam's transgression on the behalf of those he would represent; he must also do for them what Adam failed to do, namely, to obey God perfectly. But the problem is that all mankind descending from Adam by natural generation sinned in Him and fell with him. They are both guilty and have inherited a sinful nature from Adam. And besides, what man can bear the wrath of the infinite God which is due to fallen man; and what man can pay for our penalty without justice being violated if he is to be punished for crimes not his? It is clear that no ordinary man can qualify.

But God in His infinite wisdom has a plan. The plan is for the second Adam to be none other than *“His own only-begotten and eternal Son”* taking on the fullness of the *“true human nature with all its infirmities, sin excepted.”*

It is in Christ our Immanuel that God's promise to bless His elect could be and would be fulfilled. Christ can be the second Adam (1 Cor 15:45), for he is fully man both in body and soul. Yet Christ can represent us before God and bear His wrath against sin because He is also fully God. Indeed, because He is God, there is no injustice for him to bear our sin since the creditor always reserves the right to forgive the debtor by assuming the loss himself. As man, Christ qualifies to represent elect man. As God, Christ qualifies both to bear God's wrath and also to forgive God's debtors assuming the debt himself.

But how did Christ being the eternal Son of God become Man, or more specifically, the God-Man? He became man, we are given to confess, by *"being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit without the means of man."* This is clearly taught in the Gospel accounts (e.g. Luke 1:28-35) Christ was not imputed with the guilt of Adam because he was born of a virgin whereas guilt by God's appointment is reckoned down the line of the man, i.e., the covenant head in each family (cf. Heb 7:5). On the other hand, Christ did not inherit the sin nature of Adam through Mary because of the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary in her conception and pregnancy (cf. Lk 1:35). At the same time, however, it is clear from Scripture that Christ is fully man, having a true body and a rational soul (Heb 2:14-18). It is also clear that humanly, or we may even say, genetically, he descended from Abraham and David. It is important that we confess this truth not only because the Scripture affirms it (e.g. Mt 1:1, 6; Lk 1:32; 3:31; 34; etc), but also because of the numerous prophecies in the Old Testament that refer to Him as the "root of Jesse" (Isa 11:10); "seed of David" (e.g. Jn 7:42; cf. 2 Sam 7:12ff); and "seed of Abraham" (2 Chr 20:7; cf. Gal 3:16).

## Article XIX

# The Union and Distinction of the Two Natures in the Person of Christ

*We believe that by this conception the person of the Son is inseparably united and connected with the human nature; so that there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person; yet each nature retains its own distinct properties. As, then, the divine nature has always remained uncreated, without beginning of days or end of life, filling heaven and earth, so also has the human nature not lost its properties but remained a creature, having beginning of days, being a finite nature, and retaining all the properties of a real body. And though He has by His resurrection given immortality to the same, nevertheless He has not changed the reality of His human nature; forasmuch as our salvation and resurrection also depend on the reality of His body. But these two natures are so closely united in one person that they were not separated even by His death. Therefore that which He, when dying, commended into the hands of His Father, was a real human spirit, departing from His body. But in the meantime the divine nature always remained united with the human, even when He lay in the grave; and the Godhead did not cease to be in Him, any more than it did when He was an infant, though it did not so clearly manifest itself for a while. Wherefore we confess that He is very God and very man: very God by His power to conquer death; and very man that He might die for us according to the infirmity of His flesh.*

### **Comment**

In the previous article, we saw how the eternal Son of God took on human flesh and was fully man. In the present article, we are given to reaffirm also the deity of Christ, and how He is one person with two natures and therefore two wills forever.

This affirmation is necessary for three reasons. Firstly, it is necessary because it is revealed in Scripture; secondly, this orthodox doctrine that has been affirmed has been much misunderstood and challenged by heretical positions in the history of the Church; and thirdly, only as the God-Man as affirmed can Christ serve as the Redeemer of the elect.

The doctrine that Christ is fully God and fully man has already been shown from Scripture in our exposition of Articles 10 & 18.

The doctrinal proposition that he is one person in two natures is easily derived from Scripture not only from the fact He is always referred to as a single person, but also from verses such as Colossian 2:9—“For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (cf. Isa 7:14; Jn 10:30; etc). The fact that this does not mean Christ is therefore semi-God and semi-Man can be seen in the Lord Jesus prayer to the Father in the Garden of

Gethsemane in the words, “not my will, but thine, be done” (Lk 22:42). Since God is one, the will of the Father and the will of the Son is one, yet Christ talks about another will. This other will can be none other than His human will. Likewise, the Lord Jesus speaks of not knowing the day of His second coming (Mk 13:32), which shows that it is possible for His divine nature to be in repose and for Him to speak according to His human knowledge. Now, in so far as the will and the intellect defines the nature of a rational being, it is clear that Christ has two natures—one divine and one human.

From these and other biblical derivations, we can quite easily arrive at the basic declaration of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) that Jesus Christ is one Person who has a fully divine nature and a fully human nature, which two natures are without confusion. The other adjectives without change, without division and without separation are a little more difficult to prove directly from Scripture.

The fact that the two natures are without change can be inferred from Scriptural statements such as

## Article XX

# God Has Manifested His Justice and Mercy in Christ

*We believe that God, who is perfectly merciful and just, sent His Son to assume that nature in which the disobedience was committed, to make satisfaction in the same, and to bear the punishment of sin by His most bitter passion and death. God therefore manifested His justice against His Son when He laid our iniquities upon Him, and poured forth His mercy and goodness on us, who were guilty and worthy of damnation, out of mere and perfect love, giving His Son unto death for us, and raising Him for our justification, that through Him we might obtain immortality and life eternal.*

### Comment

Justice and mercy are two attitudes often viewed as antithetical. Just as one cannot be completely sad and perfectly happy at the same time, so it is perceived that one cannot show complete mercy and perfect justice at the same time to the same person. However, if this is true then it would pose a problem for our salvation—for God must show us mercy to save us, and yet He must be perfectly just. But thanks be to God for His infinite wisdom and love, for what is impossible with man is possible with Him—through Christ!

As sinners, we deserve God's wrath and curse. Justice demands that we be punished with eternal death for the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). In order to show us mercy without violating justice, God must punish our sin. As so He does, for He punished His own son for our sin. As the prophet Isaiah puts it: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:6). He does not violate justice in doing so because He and His Son are one (Jn 10:30). And so we are given to confess that God "*manifested His justice against His Son when He laid our iniquities upon Him, and poured forth His mercy and goodness on us, who were guilty and worthy of damnation.*"

He who is spotlessly without sin and deserves nothing but blessing and glory was "made a made a curse for us" (Gal 3:13) so that we who are wholly without righteousness and deserve nothing but curses and hell might have everlasting life and eternal glory.

All these are done, "*out of [God's] mere and perfect love, giving His Son unto death for us, and raising Him for our justification, that through Him we might obtain immortality and life eternal.*"

Oh the love, mercy, justice and wisdom of God displayed in our salvation!

## Article XXI

# The Satisfaction of Christ, Our Only High Priest, for Us

*We believe that Jesus Christ is ordained with an oath to be an everlasting High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek; and that He has presented Himself in our behalf before the Father, to appease His wrath by His full satisfaction, by offering Himself on the tree of the cross, and pouring out His precious blood to purge away our sins, as the prophets had foretold. For it is written: He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and numbered with the transgressors; and condemned by Pontius Pilate as a malefactor, though he had first declared Him innocent. Therefore, He restored that which he took not away, and suffered, the righteous for the unrighteous, as well in His body as in His soul, feeling the terrible punishment which our sins had merited; insomuch that his sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground. He called out: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? and has suffered all this for the remission of our sins.*

*Wherefore we justly say with the apostle Paul that we know nothing save Jesus Christ, and him crucified; we count all things but loss and refuse for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord, in whose wounds we find all manner of consolation. Neither is it necessary to seek or invent any other means of being reconciled to God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified. This is also the reason why He was called by the angel of God, JESUS, that is to say, SAVIOUR, because He would save his people from their sins.*

### **Comment**

The Christian faith is founded upon Christ and His propitiatory sacrifice. All who are saved must believe all that is revealed about Him in the Scriptures; and such as truly believe and are truly saved are inevitably so overwhelmed by what they have received that their hearts do overflow with gratitude and confidence in Christ. Thus, they find themselves resting in the sufficiency of Christ as their only saviour and Lord, and basking in His love.

All these is true; and would probably do as a brief and systematic summary of our faith. However, such a statement would also be somewhat cold and clinical.

Much more heart-warming is the collage of biblical revelation in the statement which we are given to confess in the present article.

This article has two paragraphs. The first paragraph is an ensemble biblical data on Christ's work of substitutionary atonement with very little

by way of exposition. The second paragraph draws from Scripture how we should respond and think in regard to what the Lord has done for us.

There is little need to elaborate at present on what is stated except to repeat it with Scriptural references inserted:

We believe that Jesus Christ is ordained with an oath to be an everlasting High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6; 6:10); and that He has presented Himself in our behalf before the Father, to appease His wrath by His full satisfaction (Heb 9:24; Rom 5:9), by offering Himself on the tree of the cross (1Pt 2:24; Gal 3:3), and pouring out His precious blood to purge away our sins (Heb 9:14, 22; 1Pt 1:19), as the prophets had foretold (Lk 24:25-26). For it is written: He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and numbered with the transgressors (Isa 53:5-6, 9); and condemned by Pontius Pilate as a malefactor, though he had first declared Him innocent (Mt 27:24ff). Therefore, He restored that which he took not away (Ps 69:4), and suffered, the righteous for the unrighteous (1Pt 3:18), as well in His body as in His soul (1Pt 4:1; Jn 12:27), feeling the terrible punishment which our sins had merited; insomuch that his sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground (Lk 22:44). He called out: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Ps 22:1; Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34) and has suffered all this for the remission of our sins (Mt 26:28; Rom 3:25).

Wherefore we justly say with the apostle Paul that we know nothing save Jesus Christ, and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2); we count all things but loss and refuse for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord (Phil 3:8), in whose wounds we find all manner of consolation (1Pt 2:24; 2 Cor 1:5). Neither is it necessary to seek or invent any other means of being reconciled to God than this only sacrifice, once offered (Heb 10:12; Gal 1:8), by which he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified (Heb 10:14). This is also the reason why He was called by the angel of God, JESUS, that is to say, SAVIOUR, because He would save his people from their sins (Mt 1:21).

May the Lord grant us that these things may often be on our lips and in our thought to shape us into the kind of grateful and biblical disciples of our Lord.

## Article XXII

# Our Justification Through Faith in Jesus Christ

*We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him. For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides Him, would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Saviour.*

*Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.*

### Comment

In the previous article, we are given to confess from clear biblical testimony how the Lord Jesus Christ is the sole and sufficient Saviour of His people. This is the “*great mystery*” which is referred to in the present article. It is a mystery because its details were kept secret since the world began, but is now revealed in the preaching of the Gospel (Rom 16:25). It is a mystery also because the full implication of it continues to be hid from all who remain outside Christ (Mk 4:11). The only way for sinners to have a “*true knowledge of this great mystery*” is for the Holy Spirit to open their eyes and unstop their ears to enable them to see and hear, and to appreciate what God would reveal to them concerning the Saviour and their need of Him. In this way, “*the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him.*”

By this gift of faith (Eph 2:8), we are enabled firstly, to understand the truths laid down in Scriptures about who Christ is and what He has done; secondly, to be convinced that we need Him to save us from our sin; and thirdly, to actually embrace Him and all the blessings He has procured for us. And it is this same faith that persuades us that we need none but Christ and Christ alone to save us, for by this faith we receive Christ as our Saviour. If Christ is our Saviour, then it must follow that all we need for our salvation is found in Him. This is because Christ cannot be half a

Saviour (which an idea that is “*too gross a blasphemy*” to entertain). Thus, He must save completely. Thus, it cannot be *that “something more is required besides Him”* for salvation.

It is on this basis that we may confess with the apostle Paul that “*we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works.*”

Faith we must remember, do not justify us. It is Christ who justifies us by imputing His righteous to us. Faith is just the instrument or the spiritual hand to receive all that Christ has procured for us in His life (i.e. His preceptive obedience) and His death (i.e. His penal obedience on our behalf). When we say that we are justified by faith alone, we are saying that we are justified by Christ alone without any contributions on our part. Even our faith is wrought in our heart by the Spirit of Christ! But it is by this faith that we enter into a relationship with Christ and are kept “*in communion with Him in all His benefits.*” When we receive these benefits by faith, they “become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.

## Article XXIII

### Wherein Our Justification Before God Consists

*We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied; as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the blessedness of man that God imputes righteousness to him apart from works. And the same apostle says that we are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

*And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in anything in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig-leaves. And, verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. And therefore every one must pray with David: O Jehovah, enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight no man living is righteous.*

#### **Comment**

The Lord Jesus took on human nature to save us from our sin. But wherein consists our salvation?

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that our salvation consists primarily in our being made holy by the infusion or impartation of Christ's righteousness to us. In this way, we are essentially, enabled to co-operate with grace to save ourselves. More specifically, we are enabled to do penance to atone for our sins, and we are enabled to do good works to merit salvation. Rome, we must remember, is semi-Pelagian (which is essentially the same as Arminianism).

The Reformed and Protestant Faith, on the other hand, teaches us that our salvation consists primarily in our being forgiven for the sake of Christ and imputed with His righteousness. Of course, we do believe that Christ does impart His righteousness to us. He does so by His Spirit in the process of our salvation, and we must respond to what He is doing by working out our salvation with fear and trembling. However, ultimately, it is not our sanctification but our justification that saves us. It is Christ who saves us by procuring forgiveness and righteousness for us. We contribute nothing to it, and we can do nothing against it, though those who are justified will also be sanctified and will respond to God's grace.

Thus, we are given to confess in the present article that *“our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied.”*

Observe how the statement speaks of remission or the removal of guilt as well as the imputation of righteousness. Reformed theologians often think of the removal of guilt as occasioned by the death or penal obedience of Christ, whereas the imputation of righteousness pertains to the perceptive or active obedience of Christ as He kept the Laws of God perfectly (to fulfill the Covenant of Works as the Second Adam). This is a helpful and accurate way of thinking. However, we must not think that it is wrong to speak of our being imputed with righteousness as an implied consequence of our remission of sin. This is especially since the inference is highlighted by the apostle Paul under inspiration when he cited Psalm 32:1-2 in the words—

“Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin” (Rom 4:6-8).

Notice that Psalm 32 makes no mention of God imputing righteousness, but only of God forgiving and imputing not iniquity!

Therefore, let us understand that Christ’s preceptive and penal obedience can never really be separated; and so our remission of sin can never really be separated from our being imputed with righteousness. Thus, we must understand all references to justification by grace as comprising both of these aspects. This is how we must think of Paul’s words in Romans 3:24 that we are *“justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”*

But what shall we do with this knowledge that our salvation consists largely and primarily on our justification in Christ? This is the theme of the second paragraph in the present article, which we may restate thus:

First of all, we must hold fast to it humbly and gratefully. We must remind ourselves that our salvation is entirely by the grace of God through the Lord Jesus Christ. We contributed nothing to it, nor could we have merited our salvation. Rather, we must believe, rely and rest *“upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone.”* We are justified by grace through faith alone.

Secondly, we may approach God freely and confidently, on the basis that we are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone, rather than through our own efforts.

Thirdly, we need not be crippled by a sense of guilt, fear, terror or dread when our consciences denounce us for our sin. Neither should we attempt to cover ourselves with fig leaves like Adam. Rather, we should go unto the Lord with humble acknowledgement that we have fallen short of his glory, confessing that we are worthy of His rejection and condemnation, but thanking Him for forgiveness and acceptance so rich and free in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## Article XXIV

### **Mans Sanctification and Good Works**

*We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, sanctifies him and makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin. Therefore it is so far from being true that this justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation. Therefore it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man; for we do not speak of a vain faith, but of such a faith which is called in Scripture a faith working through love, which excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word.*

*These works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless they are of no account towards our justification, for it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good.*

*Therefore we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?); nay, we are indebted to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He who worketh in us both to will and to work, for his good pleasure. Let us therefore attend to what is written: When ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do. In the meantime we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts.*

*Moreover, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them. Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be continually vexed if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior.*

### **Comments**

In the previous article, we saw how our salvation consists essentially in our justification by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone. We are saved not on account of anything we have done, but on account of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us. By faith we receive and rest upon Christ and what He has done for us. And this faith is a gift of God (Eph 2:8). This, we believe, is a biblical doctrine rediscovered during the 16th Century Protestant Reformation. It is, indeed, the article of theology on which the church stands or falls. However, this verity immediately leads

us to a question or objection, depending on who raises it. The question is: Does this not lead to antinomianism or easy-believism? If a Christian is saved only by faith, then would it not imply that one can continue to live in sin and have no regards to good works and holy lives and yet be saved on account of his faith?

The present article answers this objection and in the process presents us with a lovely statement with which to confess what we believe should be the place of good works in our Christian walk. The answer simply stated is that the saving faith is not alone. The work of the Spirit which produces faith in us is that which makes us new creatures which loves God and desires to do good works out of gratitude to him. Therefore, it is impossible that that believer should have no desire to walk in holiness.

Thus we are given to confess that *“We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, sanctifies him and makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin.”*

Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God (Rom 10:17). Man is by nature dead in sin and trespasses. We could not possibly hear and believe without divine intervention. This intervention comes by way of the Holy Spirit work of spiritual quickening (Eph 2:1). This work is usually wrought at the moment when the call of the Gospel is issued. But it is this work that plants spiritual ears as well as the seed of faith in our heart so that the gospel call becomes an effectual call. It is like when the Lord Jesus called out to Lazarus to come forth. Lazarus was dead and decaying. He could not have heard except that the power of the Lord to quicken him accompanied and went ahead of the command to come forth. So Lazarus was made alive, he heard the Lord and He came forth. So too when we were converted. We were made alive; we heard the effectual call, we believed, we continue to hear the word by faith, and Spirit applies the Word in our heart to change us, to make use new men, to free us from the bondage of sin and to excite us to live a new life, which of course includes doing good works, for we are “created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Eph 2:10).

Had this not been the case, we would still be walking in sin, in self-love or at the most a fear of damnation. But now along with faith, we are enabled to love God and to grow in Christ. Justifying faith, then, is not dead, vain or unfruitful. Rather it is “faith which worketh by love” (Gal 5:6).

But we must be careful to remember that these good works wrought by faith, while *“good and acceptable in the sight of God”* because they are sanctified by grace, do not contribute to our justification. We are justified

apart from works and we must be justified before we can do any work acceptable to God. Good works, then may in some ways, evidence our justification or salvation (Heb 6:9); but as we are reminded in the final paragraph of this article, they must not be the basis of our confidence. Though we are enabled to do good works, they are always tainted with sin, and never good enough to merit salvation by. So if we are to found our assurance of salvation upon our good works, we would become rather discouraged and filled with doubt. We must rather always rely only on the merits of the death and suffering of our saviour. When in doubt we must always look to Christ, not to our works.

In that case, why do we do good works? The penultimate paragraph of this article answers this question obliquely. The answer is that it is a privilege for which we are indebted to God; and also that God encourages us to exercise the privilege by promising to reward us for it. Of course, we must remember that this is a reward of grace rather than a wage of merit, and therefore we must always do good works out of love and gratitude towards God with humble confession when we have done all that *“we are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do.”*

## The Abolishing of the Ceremonial Law

*We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians; yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion. In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honourableness to the glory of God, according to His will.*

### Comment

The previous article dealt with the doctrine of sanctification. *“Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness”* (WSC 35). Sanctification, we must remember, is wrought by the Holy Spirit as we make use of the means of grace, especially the hearing of God’s Word, sacraments and prayer. Keeping of God’s Law does not sanctify us. Nevertheless, we must keep God’s Law if we would grow in sanctification, for “He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination” (Prov 28:9). No one who grieves the Holy Spirit by walking lawlessly can expect to grow in sanctification.

But what exactly are the laws that we must keep? The Reformed Church has traditionally classified the laws of God into three categories: Moral, Ceremonial and Civil. The Moral Law is summarised in the Ten Commandments. These are clearly perpetual, universal and obligatory upon all men throughout the ages. The Civil Law as given by Moses is really a legislated and national application of the Moral Law for Israel when she was the covenant people of God. Today the Civil Law is no longer directly applicable to God’s people unless the civil authority over them chooses to incorporate them into the civil legislation of the land (which they should).

What about the Ceremonial Laws?

Well, this is exactly the concern of the present article. Here, we are given to confess that the Ceremonial Law together with all its ceremonies and symbols have been abrogated with the coming of Christ. These ceremonies and symbols were all “a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things” (Heb 10:1; cf. Col 2:17). They were designed to point the people of God in the Old Covenant to the person and work of the Messiah to come. The Tabernacle and its furnishing and

services, for example, pointed to Christ who Tabernacled with us (Jn 1:14). The animal sacrifices, likewise, all pointed to Christ who “by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified” (Heb 10:14).

Since Christ has come, and has suffered and died, and rose again, “*all the shadows are accomplished.*” They have ceased their usefulness for the people of God, and therefore “*must be abolished among Christians.*”

But note that this does not mean that they have become irrelevant to us, for “*the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ.*” Therefore we may read and study the Ceremonial Law with its ordinances and ceremonies from the Scriptures and be reminded of what Christ has done and is doing for us. Indeed, because the principles and theological implications of the Ceremonial Law has always remained relevant to us, the Old Testament Scriptures continue to be a necessary part of our spiritual diet for our sanctification, and to teach us concerning our duties towards God. Thus we so affirm that “*we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honourableness to the glory of God, according to His will.*”

## Article XXVI

### Christ's Intercession

*We believe that we have no access unto God but alone through the only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous; who therefore became man, having united in one person the divine and human natures, that we men might have access to the divine Majesty, which access would otherwise be barred against us. But this Mediator, whom the Father has appointed between Him and us, ought in no wise to affright us by His majesty, or cause us to seek another according to our fancy. For there is no creature, either in heaven or on earth, who loves us more than Jesus Christ; who, though existing in the form of God, yet emptied himself, being made in the likeness of men and of a servant for us, and in all things was made like unto his brethren. If, then, we should seek for another mediator who would be favourably inclined towards us, whom could we find who loved us more than He who laid down His life for us, even while we were his enemies? And if we seek for one who has power and majesty, who is there that has so much of both as He who sits at the right hand of God and to whom hath been given all authority in heaven and on earth? And who will sooner be heard than the own well beloved Son of God?*

*Therefore it was only through distrust that this practice of dishonouring, instead of honouring, the saints was introduced, doing that which they never have done nor required, but have on the contrary steadfastly rejected according to their bounden duty, as appears by their writings. Neither must we plead here our unworthiness; for the meaning is not that we should offer our prayers to God on the ground of our own worthiness, but only on the ground of the excellency and worthiness of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is become ours by faith.*

*Therefore the apostle, to remove this foolish fear, or rather distrust, from us, rightly says that Jesus Christ in all things was made like unto his brethren, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted. And further to encourage us to go to Him, he says: Having then a great high priest, who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need. The same apostle says: Having boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near with a true heart in fullness of faith, etc. Likewise: Christ hath his priesthood unchangeable; wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.*

*What more can be required? since Christ Himself says: I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me. To what purpose should we, then, seek another advocate, since it has pleased God to give us His*

*own Son as an Advocate? Let us not forsake Him to take another, or rather to seek after another, without ever being able to find him; for God well knew, when He gave Him to us, that we were sinners.*

*Therefore, according to the command of Christ, we call upon the heavenly Father through Jesus Christ our only Mediator, as we are taught in the Lords Prayer; being assured that whatever we ask of the Father in His Name will be granted us.*

### **Comment**

The Lord Jesus says: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (Jn 14:6). The apostle Peter is echoing these words when he says: “there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved [but the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth]” (Acts 4:12, 10). Likewise, the apostle Paul is expressing the same thought, albeit in more technical terms when he says: “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5).

These words among others ought to convince every believer that the Lord Jesus is the only mediator and advocate by whom we may come unto the Father in prayer, and that we should seek no other.

Lamentably, however, the Roman Catholic Church had through some twisted logic coupled with superstition insisted that believers can and should seek the intercession of other mediators such as the virgin Mary, the apostles and departed saints. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, for example states: “The Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix” (no. 969). “We can pray with and to her. The prayer of the Church is sustained by the prayer of Mary and united with it in hope” (no. 2679). “Our prayer for [the dead] is capable not only of helping them, but of making their intercession for us effective” (no. 958). “We can and should ask [the departed saints] to intercede for us and for the whole world” (no. 2683). It is argued that Christ is the only Mediator, but that does not mean that we cannot have any other mediators—just as we might ask someone we know to pray for us. It has also been argued that Christ is majestic and austere and therefore believers would benefit from the intercession of others who can be more effectively touched by the feelings of our infirmities and understand us better.

The present article,—which is one of the longest in the Belgic Confession,—is really an attempt to address this deplorable Romish practice. Perhaps its length reflects the persuasiveness and tenacity of the practice in Christendom at the time of the Reformation even if it troubles very few Protestant believers today.

Several arguments are mustered and interwoven against it in a rather conversational manner here. We may, however, organise the propositions as follows:

In the first place, while it is true that the Son of God is glorious in majesty, it is also true that He is appointed by the Father to be our only Mediator and Advocate, and He has taken on human nature for this very purpose.

In the second place, Christ Jesus had demonstrated greater love for us than any other creature in heaven or earth by laying down His life for us. Therefore, there can be no other mediators who could be more favourably inclined towards us than Him.

In the third place, Christ Jesus, after he laid down His life for us ascended up to heaven and is seated “on the right hand of the Majesty on him” (Heb 1:3); and unto Him is committed all authority in heaven and in earth (Mt 28:18). This being the case, it is foolish to look for another mediator who is more likely to be heard, for there are none.

In the fourth place, it is a dishonour rather than an honour to the saints to think that they would receive our petitions and intercede on our behalf in heaven when they would never receive any prayer while on earth (cf. Acts 14:15). We must understand that there is a difference asking someone we know to pray for us, and petitioning departed saints to pray for us. The one is a request, the other is a prayer if they can hear us in the first place.

In the fifth place, we must never appeal by false humility to our unworthiness to pray to God, for we can only come to Him *“on the ground of the excellency and worthiness of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is become ours by faith.”* Were we worthy, we would not need the mediation of Christ. He came precisely to mediate for us due to our unworthiness. Therefore, we should not seek another.

In the sixth place, the apostle to the Hebrews, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit sought precisely to allay our *“foolish fear, or rather distrust”* by showing us the Christ Jesus is our Compassionate Great High Priest who was touched with the feelings of our infirmities and was tempted like as we are and yet without sin (Heb 4:15). He had concluded in the same chapter: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16; see also Heb 7:25).

Finally, it is the Father himself who gave us *“His own Son as an Advocate”* knowing full well “that we were sinners”; and Christ himself have commanded that we should call upon the heavenly Father through Him alone as our Mediator. And He has also assured us *“that whatever we ask*

*of the Father in His Name will be granted us.”*

## Article XXVII

### **The Catholic Christian Church**

*We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.*

*This Church has been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof; which is evident from this that Christ is an eternal King, which without subjects He cannot be. And this holy Church is preserved or supported by God against the rage of the whole world; though it sometimes for a while appears very small, and in the eyes of men to be reduced to nothing; as during the perilous reign of Ahab the Lord reserved unto Him seven thousand men who had not bowed their knees to Baal.*

*Furthermore, 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.*

#### **Comment**

The term “catholic” means “universal” or as stated in the last paragraph of the present article “*is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world.*” Therefore, the “Catholic Christian Church” which is referred to in the title of the present article must not be confused with the “Roman Catholic Church.” The Roman Catholic Church, is neither universal (it is ostensibly Roman even if it has spread around the world); nor is it Christian (since it denies the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone); nor is it truly a church (since it is an organisation headed by the Pope rather than a body headed by Christ).

When a Protestant Christian speaks of the Catholic or Universal Christian Church, he is speaking of the body the elect of God united to Christ.

This is a very broad and generic definition that very few Protestants will disagree with even though there may be some disagreement amongst professing Protestants as to who are the elect. Most Reformed Protestants today, however, will speak of an Invisible Church Universal and a Visible Church Universal.

The Westminster Confession of Faith defines them thus:

*WCF 25.1 The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is*

*the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.*

*WCF 25.2 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, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.*

The Belgic Confession, does not have such a precise definition. However, it appears to be speaking of the Catholic Church as the intersection between the Church Visible and the Church Invisible. Its members are regenerated and justified elect. These are those who have been sanctified or set apart in time by the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Reprobate as well as the elect who are not yet converted are not really part of the catholic church whether they are covenant children or otherwise.

This may not be the best way of looking at the Church for the Scripture does include infant of believers as members of the Church regardless of whether they are regenerate or not (cf. 1 Cor 7:14; Acts 2:39; Ezk 16:20–21; Rom 11:16; Gen 3:15; 17:7). A failure to acknowledge that children of believers are in some sense members of the church can lead either to the erroneous view that all infants of believers are to be presumed to be regenerate, or to the equally pernicious view that the Baptists are right that children of believers are to be regarded as aliens from Christ. Both of these views, we believe, are not consistent with the whole counsel of the Word of God.

Perhaps, the framer of the Belgic Confession, has so defined the Catholic Church as to preserve the holy character of the church; and it was deemed that the inclusion of any who are unregenerate as members would be contrary to the said character. This as, we saw, need not be so.

Be as that may be the case, the Catholic Church,— however we look at it,—*“has been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof.”* This church, of which Christ is King, has been through the history *“preserved or supported by God against the rage of the whole world.”* This can be shown from Scriptural testimony as well as from history. For example, during the reign of Ahab in the Northern Kingdom, Elijah thought that he alone remained who feared the Lord; but the LORD showed him that he had yet seven thousand men who had not bowed their knees to Baal.

Moreover, that the members of the catholic church, although universal, dispersed and diverse are united in Church. The regenerated or glorified

members of the Church Universal Visible are *“joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit”* as we are given to confess here. The full membership of the Church Invisible Universal which includes the elect yet unborn and those who are born but not yet converted are united in their election by the Father, and substitutionary atonement by Christ. Christ gave himself for the church, even the Church Universal Invisible. Likewise, the members of the Church Universal Visible are united in profession and allegiance to Christ at least outwardly.

## Article XXVIII

# Every One Is Bound to Join Himself to the True Church

*We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; 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 the more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church, and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God has established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God.*

### Comment

We noted how the previous article speaks of the Church Universal as comprising the regenerate members of Christ around the world. Thus, in the present article, the term *“holy congregation”* does not refer to a local congregation, but to the entire Catholic Church or the Church Universal together with its institutional manifestations where ever her members are gathered. In other words, the *“holy congregation”* refers to the sum total of all the regenerate members in true branches of the Church of Christ around the world at the present time.

On the basis of this implied definition of the Church Universal, we are given to confess that *“outside of it there is no salvation.”*

The more accurately and carefully crafted statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith on the same proposition states in part:

*WCF 25.2 The visible Church... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.*

The proof text supplied leads us to the Lord’s Parable of the Net and Fishes, where we read: “the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind” (Mt 13:47). All within the net (of true gospel administration and preaching) are part of the visible

Church. Ordinarily, only these have the possibility of being sorted out as good fishes and therefore save. All outside the net are “bad fishes” which are not even considered for inclusion in the fisherman’s vessel (v. 48). Thus Luke speaks of “the Lord add[ing] to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47).

For this reason, we gladly confess as we are given in the present article, that “*no person... ought to withdraw from [the true church— wheresoever God has established it]*” and that “all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it.”

Indeed, we are convinced that this is an absolute, non-negotiable duty. “*No person of whatsoever state or condition he may be*” may excuse himself from it.

But how should a believer fulfil this obligation in practice? Would a member of a true branch of the Church of Christ violate this obligation if he chooses to resign from the membership of the congregation of which he is a member to take up membership in another?

Well, it is clear that such a believer would violate the obligation if he refuses to join a true church or leaves a true congregation and does not take up membership in another true branch of the Church of Christ, or takes up membership in an apostate or apostatising church. If Christ has appointed under-shepherds to rule over His people (Heb 13:17), then such as refuse to come under the oversight of His under-shepherds in true churches are despising Christ and His institution of the Church. There, of course, a difference between refusing to take up membership and not being able to take up membership for one reason or another. We may say that he who refuses to join a true church sins, whereas one who feels he is unable to join a true church despite his effort to find one is accountable to the Lord for what he does or does not do. Suffice to say that “*all those who separate themselves from the [true church] or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God.*”

Be as that may be the case, we agree with the present article that every member of the church must seek to function as a faithful and fruitful member of the congregation of which he is a member by “*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.*”

They should not, upon pretext that they are faithful members of the Church Universal withdraw themselves or cause division in a true branch

of the church of Christ. No man can be a faithful member of the Church Universal who is not attached to any branch of the Church Universal.

It is, no doubt, to reinforce the importance of the duty of faithful church membership in a branch of the true Church of Christ that we are given to assert in the second paragraph that we should (1) separate ourselves from those who profess to be believers “*who do not belong to the [true] Church*”; and (2) join ourselves to the true Church “*wheresoever God has established it*” even if we are persecuted by the civil authorities to the point of corporal punishment and even the death penalty for doing so!

Sadly, this is an article that few,— in this age of individualism and shallow-evangelicalism, — take seriously today. Too many, including those who profess to be Reformed believers are contented to continue as members in apostate or apostatising churches, or as private individuals not accountable to any legitimate church authority. And too many are willing to forsake true churches to seek membership elsewhere for reasons pertaining to unmet temporal needs.

## Article XXIX

### **The Marks of the True Church, and wherein it Differs from the False 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. But we speak not here of hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it; but we say that the body and communion of the true Church must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the Church.*

*The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in chastening 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. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.*

*With respect to those who are members of the Church, they may be known by the marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof. But this is not to be understood as if there did not remain in them great infirmities; but they fight against them through the Spirit all the days of their life, continually taking their refuge in the blood, death, passion, and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they have remission of sins, through faith in Him.*

*As for the false Church, it ascribes more power and authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit itself to the yoke of Christ. Neither does it administer the sacraments as appointed by Christ in His Word, but adds to and takes from them, as it thinks proper; it relies more upon men than upon Christ; and persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God and rebuke it for its errors, covetousness, and idolatry.*

*These two Churches are easily known and distinguished from each other.*

### **Comment**

This chapter of the Belgic Confession contains a statement which is most often highlighted whenever the doctrine of the Church is discussed or taught. It is from this chapter that we learn that the three marks of a true church or a true branch of the Church of Christ are: (1) If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; (2) if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; and (3) if church discipline is exercised in chastening of sin.

This is the heart of this chapter which make it most fondly appreciated by

all branches of the Reformed and Presbyterian Church.

However, it should be noted that due to the way that the true Church is defined in the Belgic Confession, the wordings and content of this chapter can be a little exasperating for those who are more familiar with the terminology of the Westminster Standards.

In particular, we must understand that the “*true Church*” spoken about here refers to the congregation of regenerate members of the Church Invisible Universal rather than to true branches of the Church Visible Universal. Hypocrite or false professors of faith are not regarded as part of the Church even though they are externally in it.

Reformed Presbyterians, on the other hand, generally speaks of true churches, or more accurately true branches of the Church of Christ without any reference to the regeneracy of the members. Thus, under the Belgic definition, the true Church will cease to exist in a congregation which has no regenerate members, even if there may be elect member yet to be regenerated. Under the Westminsterian definition, on the other hand, the congregation can still be regarded as a true branch even if there are no regenerate members left in her,—so long as there remains faithful preaching, administration of the faithful sacrament and faith exercise of church discipline.

These technical differences apart, all Reformed branches of the Christian Church agree that the three marks of the true Church provide a set of objective criteria for the true church (as in the church universal visible or the true branch of the church of Christ) to distinguish herself from all cults and “*sects that call themselves the Church.*”

We agree also that the three marks do distinguish the true church from the false because they establish “*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.*” Some Reformed Presbyterian Churches, on the basis of WSC 25.4, would include purity of worship as a fourth mark, although most would agree that it pertains more to the well-being rather than the being of the church.

Be as that may be the case, we heartily agree that the three marks are missing in the false Church. Instead of faithful preaching, the false Church “*it ascribes more power and authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God,*” and as such will not submit itself to the yoke of Christ. Instead of administering the sacrament as appointed by Christ, the false Church “*adds to and takes from them, as it thinks proper.*” And instead of exercising church discipline faithfully, it seeks to please men rather than

please Christ for *“it relies more upon men than upon Christ”*; and thus it persecutes the righteous. In particular, the false Church *“persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God.”* Indeed it has been shown to have no qualms about persecuting those who by their word and testimony *“rebuke it for its errors, covetousness, and idolatry.”*

In any case, since the true church may be known by the three marks, believers who are members of the true Church has no *“right to separate himself”* from it. Note that technically, this does not say anything about a believer leaving a true branch of the church of Christ for another true branch, though it forbids leaving for a false church. But practically, each member of a true congregation should seek as much as possible to remain a faithful and fruitful member of the congregation unless compelled to move by good and righteous reasons. Such loyalty conduce to the cultivation of unity and brotherly accountability in the church of Christ.

But now on a somewhat different but related subject, we should understand that being a member of the true Church does not guarantee that one is a true Christians. Therefore, we are also given to confess in this chapter what are some marks of a true believers, namely, (1) a clear profession of faith; (2) apparent avoidance of sin; (3) pursuit of righteousness; (4) evident love of God and neighbours by keeping of God’s commandments; (5) resolute pursuit of Christ and His Kingdom; and (6) mortification of the flesh and the deeds of the flesh.

This, of course, does not mean that every believer will be perfect in these areas. However it does mean that they will fight against their infirmities and failures *“through the Spirit all the days of their life.”* In this way, they will be shut up to Christ in whom they have remission of sin. And they will take *“refuge in the blood, death, passion, and obedience”* of Christ.

## Article XXX

# The Government of the Church and its Offices

*We believe that this true Church must be governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word; namely, that there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church; that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors chastened and restrained by spiritual means; also that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities. By these means everything will be carried on in the Church with good order and decency, when faithful men are chosen, according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy.*

### Comments

We saw from the previous article that the marks of the manifestation of the True Church; or a true branch of the Church of Christ are: (1) If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; (2) if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; and (3) if church discipline is exercised in chastening of sin.

But in order for these things to be true in a congregation of Christ, it is necessary that it be governed by a “*spiritual polity*”. It is not surprising then that Christ the King of the Church has appointed in His Word a form of Church government for God’s people to implement. This form is taught in a number of passages in the Scriptures such as 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 where the apostle Paul outlines the qualification for elders and deacons. These passages imply that Christ has appointed only two permanent offices for the governing of His Church. But in passages such as 1 Timothy 5:17, we are given to understand that there are some elders who are called not only to rule with the other elders, but appointed “especially [to] labour in the word and doctrine.” We call these teaching-elders pastors or ministers. The privilege of preaching and administration of the sacraments belong to them rather than to the ruling elders.

Moreover, in Acts 6:1-6 where the historical occasion for the institution of the Diaconate is recorded, we are given to understand that deacons are not to be regarded as second-class elders, but as a separate office appointed by the Lord both to manage the ministry of mercy in the church and to support the elders in the day to day administration of the church.

In any case, the pastors, ruling-elders and deacons constitute what may be known as the “*the council of the Church.*” How this council functions is not given in the Scriptures and therefore different churches have adopted

different approaches. For some the elders and deacons will make decisions together in Consistory or Session meetings. Others, especially in the case of Reformed Presbyterian Churches, the Session and Diaconate will have their own meetings, though typically a part of their meeting will be held together.

If faithful, godly and qualified men are chosen and appointed to be elders and deacons to serve in the appropriate courts, with an appropriate church order faithfully followed, everything will *“be carried on in the Church with good order and decency.”* In this way, true religion may be preserved; true doctrine everywhere propagated; church discipline may be exercised so that sinners are *“chastened and restrained by spiritual means”* for the good of the Church and glory of Christ. Likewise, the church so settled will become effective instruments to exhibit the mercies of the Lord so that *“the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities.”*

## Article XXXI

### **The Ministers, Elders, and Deacons**

*We believe that the ministers of God's Word, the elders, and the deacons ought to be chosen to their respective offices by a lawful election by the Church, with calling upon the name of the Lord, and in that order which the Word of God teaches. Therefore every one must take heed not to intrude himself by improper means, but is bound to wait till it shall please God to call him; that he may have testimony of his calling, and be certain and assured that it is of the Lord.*

*As for the ministers of God's Word, they have equally the same power and authority wheresoever they are, as they are all ministers of Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church.*

*Moreover, in order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or slighted, we say that every one ought to esteem the ministers of Gods Word and the elders of the Church very highly for their work's sake, and be at peace with them without murmuring, strife, or contention, as much as possible.*

#### **Comment**

We have seen how Christ appointed two permanent offices, namely elders and deacons for the governance of the New Testament Church. We noted also how there are ruling elders as well as teaching elders, also called ministers of the Word and pastors.

In this article, we given to confess firstly, that these officers must be lawfully ordained; secondly, that all ministers are equal in power and authority; and thirdly that elders must be highly esteemed.

On the first point, it should be noted that the Scripture does recognise that those who would serve in the office should also desire the office. This we may infer from 1 Timothy 3:1, which reads: "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work" (1 Tim 3:1).

However, it is clear from Scriptures that no man should take any office upon himself. In the first place, by speaking of officers and those aspiring to the offices in the third person in his outline of qualifications for elders and deacons, the apostle Paul is clearly requiring the church to appoint the officers, rather than have the officers appoint themselves. In the second place, it is clear that all officers of Christ must be appointed by Christ and the Church is the body of Christ which must be instrumental in calling the officers. In the third place, the apostle Paul and Barnabas set us the example of ordaining elders in every church and praying for them with fasting (Acts 14:23). Here the word 'ordained' (cheirotoneō) refers not so much to a laying on of hand as to choosing or electing "by raising of hands" (BAGD, sv. "cheirotoneō").

Such being the case, those who desire to any office should patiently wait upon the Lord as faithful ordinary members of the congregation until it pleases God by His providence and guidance of the Spirit to call him to the office by the instrumentality of the church. Only in this way may an officer of the church *“have testimony of his calling, and be certain and assured that it is of the Lord.”*

But secondly, it should be noted that the words “presbuteros” (translated “elders”) and “episkopos” (translated “bishops”) are really synonymous. We see this from how Paul uses the two terms interchangeably in Titus 1:5-6 (See also Acts 20:17, 28). This being the case, the hierarchical system of papacy and episcopatism is clearly unbiblical. All ministers and indeed all elders have *“equally the same power and authority.”* There is only one universal Bishop and Head of the church, namely Christ.

Finally,—and perhaps in anticipation or observation of a decrease of respect and honour for the Lord’s undershepherd since there will be ideally a plurality of them in every congregation,—we are given to confess that we ought to esteem them for their work’s sake. As much as possible, we should humbly submit to their authority and care without murmuring, strife or contention.

This agrees with the teaching of the apostle that we should “Obey them that have the rule over [us], and submit [ourselves]: for they watch for [our] souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for [us]” (Heb 13:17).

## Article XXXII

### The Order and Discipline of the Church

*In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the Church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet that they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God. For this purpose, excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God.*

#### **Comment**

We have already seen how Christ, the King of the church, has appointed elders and deacons to be permanent officers of the church. We noted also the different functions between elders and deacons, on the one hand, and ruling and teaching elders on the other hand. These elders and deacons together may be called leaders or “*rulers of the church.*”

In order to rule the church effectively, these leaders must organise themselves by instituting and maintaining certain governing principles and ordinances—just like in any organisation on earth.

However, unlike the organisations in the world, the church is united to Christ and belongs directly to Him. He is the Head, we are the Body; He is the King, we are the Subjects; He is the Husband, we are His Wife. As such, the church cannot be organised and ruled according to worldly principles of human wisdom, expediency or popularity.

Rather, it must be organised and governed according to the will of our King. The will of Christ our King is given to us in the Bible. Thus we heartily confess that the rulers of the church “*ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted*” in His Word.

Conversely, we are surely right to “*reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever.*”

It is interesting that the framer of the Confession should speak about worship in the context of church government. But it is not difficult to see how they are connected, for the leaders of the church are those who in practice decide what to allow or implement and what not to allow in the

church. Their decision will affect all aspects of church life, including worship, of which the clear teaching of Scripture is that whatsoever is not appointed is forbidden. The apostle to the Hebrews, for example, says:

“Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.” (Heb 12:28-29; cf. Dt 4:23-24; Dt 12:31-32; Isa 29:13)

Our Lord Himself asserted that those who worship according to the “doctrines the commandments of men” worship Him in vain (Mt 15:9).

Thus, we reject all inventions and laws of man introduced by any church leadership that compels the worshipper to engage in unbiblical or idolatrous worship. Such laws and inventions, we must remember, are today not only found in Roman Catholicism, but in Protestantism as well.

Reformed believers and churches ought therefore to be informed and discerning. We should *“admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God.”* The apostle Paul reminds us of the same when he says: “Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Cor 14:26b); “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40); “For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace” (1 Cor 14:33).

For the same reasons, we must confess that *“excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God”*—even though it is unpalatable and unpopular to the natural man. Excommunication is not exactly synonymous with church discipline. However, it is the most severe chastisement that can be meted out by the church for unrepentant members.

The steps of church discipline are actually outlined by our Lord in Matthew 18:15-20. It must begin with private admonishment. Only when both private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of one or two witnesses remains fruitless, should the leaders of the church step in. What the leaders of the church should do from here should be determined by the Order which has been adopted by the church. Such an Order, which should be crafted with the principles laid down above, could for example, require that the unrepentant sinner who hardens himself in sin despite the admonishment of the Session or governing body should be suspended from the Lord’s Table (this step may be known as lesser excommunication). Initially, this suspension can be done privately. But if the sinner remains unrepentant, it can be announced to the church in stages. If he remains yet unrepentant after a period of time, he should be

excommunicated from the church and declared a sinner and a publican as per the Lord's instruction (Mt 18:20; cf. 1 Cor 5:4,5,7 etc).

## Article XXXIII

### The Sacraments

*We believe that our gracious God, taking account of our weakness and infirmities, has ordained the sacraments for us, thereby to seal unto us His promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God towards us, and also to nourish and strengthen our faith; which He has joined to the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which He declares to us by His Word and that which He works inwardly in our hearts, thereby confirming in us the salvation which He imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the signs are not empty or meaningless, so as to deceive us. For Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment.*

*Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Lord has instituted, which are two only, namely, the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

#### **Comment**

The word “sacrament” is not found in the Bible,” just like the word “Trinity.” However, it is a concept that is deemed so clearly biblical that it is found in all major Reformed Confessions.<sup>4</sup> But how is it derived from the Scriptures?

The doctrine of the Trinity may be derived inductively. We are led to conclude that God is Triune because we see from Scriptures that there is only one God; there are more than one persons in the Godhead; the Father is God; the Son is God; the Spirit is God and yet they are distinct, etc.

The doctrine of the Sacrament on the other hand must be derived deductively. More specifically, we can arrive intuitively at the concept of “sacraments” because Scripture reveals that the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are different from other ordinances and yet share similar characteristics with one another. Both of them have Old Testament counter-parts, namely Circumcision and the Passover; both of them are directly instituted or appointed by Christ; both of them are enjoyed with more than one of our sensory perceptions; both of them are visible signs in that they involve symbolic actions; both of them point to Christ and the benefits He has purchased for His elect; both of them are so closely connected to the benefit signified that our enjoying of the benefits is

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<sup>4</sup> The 1689 Baptist Confession, which drops the term “sacrament” in favour of the generic “ordinance” is really a corruption of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

sometimes described in terms of enjoyment of the ordinance in Scripture.

So unique are these two ordinances, that we are compelled to deduce that God has purposefully appointed them for our special benefit. At the same time, we are compelled to call these ordinances by a distinguishing name. Traditionally, they are called “sacraments” for various reasons.

The Roman Catholic Church, perhaps due to a historical misuse from the term as well as a elevation of tradition over Scriptures has multiplied the number of sacraments to seven, viz. Holy Baptism; Holy Eucharist; Holy Matrimony; Holy Orders; Confirmation; Penance and Extreme Unction. The Reformed Church on the other hand has consistently insisted that there are only two sacraments.

Moreover, a more careful study of Scripture on the Sacraments reveal what we are given to confess in the present article, namely:

(1) That God appointed them for our use in view of *“our weakness and infirmities”* especially as it pertains to our faith and spiritual well-being.

(2) That they are designed *“to seal unto us His promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God towards us.”* In other words, they are appointed to give us a stronger assurance of God’s promises and the reality of spiritual benefits He has and will bestow upon us. This is done through an appeal to our senses though they are received by faith.

(3) That they are also appointed as means *“to nourish and strengthen our faith.”*

(4) That, in other words, God *“has joined [them] to the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which He declares to us by His Word and that which He works inwardly in our hearts, thereby confirming in us the salvation which He imparts to us.”*

(5) That they may be spoken of as *“visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

(6) That *“therefore the signs are not empty or meaningless, so as to deceive us.”* And...

(7) That *“Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment”* or meaning. **Ω**

## Article XXXIV

# Holy Baptism

*We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, has made an end, by the shedding of His blood, of all other sheddings of blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin; and that He, having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, has instituted the sacrament of baptism instead thereof; by which we are received into the Church of God, and separated from all other people and strange religions, that we may wholly belong to Him whose mark and ensign we bear; and which serves as a testimony to us that He will forever be our gracious God and Father.*

*Therefore He has commanded all those who are His to be baptized with pure water, into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, thereby signifying to us, that as water washes away the filth of the body when poured upon it, and is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled upon him, so does the blood of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit internally sprinkle the soul, cleanse it from its sins, and regenerate us from children of wrath unto children of God. Not that this is effected by the external water, but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God; who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and to enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.*

*The ministers, therefore, on their part administer the sacrament and that which is visible, but our Lord gives that which is signified by the sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace; washing, cleansing, and purging our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving unto us a true assurance of His fatherly goodness; putting on us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds.*

*We believe, therefore, that every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be baptized but once with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same, since we cannot be born twice. Neither does this baptism avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.*

*Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers, who we believe ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children. And indeed Christ shed His blood no less for the washing of the children of believers than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of that which Christ has done for them; as the Lord commanded in the law that they should be made partakers of the sacrament of Christ's suffering and death shortly after they were born, by offering for them a lamb, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ. Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, baptism is to our children. And for this reason St. Paul calls baptism the circumcision of Christ.*

## Comment

We have noted that there is a connection between Circumcision and Baptism. What we have not made clear is that this connection is not merely superficial, but is rather deeply biblical and theological. Biblically, we see how the apostle Paul speaks of baptism as “the circumcision of Christ” (Col 2:11; cf. Rom Gal 3:27-29). Theologically, we see from the Scriptures that circumcision and baptism share the same spiritual meaning though they were instituted for a different dispensation. Circumcision of the Flesh clearly pointed to Circumcision of the Heart (Dt 10:16; Jer 4:4; Rom 2:29) And Circumcision of the Heart is clearly a reference to regeneration (cf. Acts 7:51). Likewise, Water-Baptism clearly points to Spirit-Baptism (Jn 1:33; 1Cor 12:13). And Spirit-Baptism or Baptism of the Holy Spirit is likewise a reference to regeneration (Tit 3:5). Again, both circumcision and baptism seal and ratify membership in the Church of Christ. Heart-Circumcision and Spirit-Baptism ratify our membership in the Church Universal *Invisible*; whereas Fleshly-Circumcision and Water-Baptism ratify our membership in the Church Universal *Visible*.

	Membership Criterion	Ratification of Membership		
		Theological Terms	OT terms	NT terms
<b>Church Invisible</b>	Election	Regeneration	Heart-Circumcision	Spirit-Baptism
<b>Church Visible</b>	Profession of Faith	Sacrament of Membership	Fleshly-Circumcision	Water-Baptism

But while there are similarities between circumcision and baptism, there are obviously also differences. In particular, circumcision was appointed for the church in the Old Covenant. Thus, it was a bloody sign, which was intricately tied to the Ceremonial Laws of the Old Testament so that those who were circumcised were expected to keep the whole law (Gal 5:3). But Christ has come, and has made an end of the law and all shedding of blood by the shedding of His blood. As such, circumcision had to be replaced with a bloodless sign.

By this bloodless sign, even water-baptism, we are,—like it was with circumcision,—officially *“received into the Church of God, and separated from all other people and strange religions, that we may wholly belong to Him whose mark and ensign we bear; and which serves as a testimony to us that He will forever be our gracious God and Father.”*

Baptism, which is sanctioned and commanded by the Lord Jesus Christ himself, involves a symbolic washing with *“pure water”* in the name of the

Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19).

When this water is thus poured on the elect, it is sacramentally connected to the blood of Christ, which is sprinkled on the soul by the Holy Spirit to *“cleanse it from its sins, and regenerate us from children of wrath unto children of God.”* And at the same time,—as we are given to confess in the paragraph,— *“renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving unto us a true assurance of His fatherly goodness; putting on us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds.”*

We must not think that this connection is so tight that as the water is poured, so the soul is regenerated. Rather, the *“gifts and invisible grace”* signified by baptism are bestowed before, after or at the same time of the administration of the sacrament. Nevertheless, while in the case of the reprobates, there will be no spiritual graces at all, we may say that under ordinary circumstances, no one who would not be baptised in his lifetime would receive the graces signified by baptism.

This being the case, we do believe, as we are given to confess, that *“every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be baptized.”* Likewise we believe that baptism must not be repeated *“since we cannot be born twice.”*

Thus, we do *“detest the error of the Anabaptists”* and their modern manifestations who not only deny infant baptism but insist that all who were baptised as infants or baptised as adults by pouring or sprinkling be re-baptised. We do not believe that the word translated “baptise” in the Bible means “immersion”, but rather “wash.” Indeed in none of the instances of baptism in the New Testament can the mode be proven to be immersion, whereas a strong case can be made for pouring or sprinkling. And we do believe that just as covenant infant boys were circumcised in the Old Covenant to ratify their membership in the Covenant, so covenant infant boys and girls are to be baptised to ratify their membership in the covenant today. There is only one Olive Tree, and infants grow on it as olive shoots. Thus the promise given to Abraham and his seed is also extended to us and our children. “The promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” says the apostle Peter (Acts 2:39).

## Article XXXV

# The Holy Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ

*We believe and confess that our Saviour Jesus Christ did ordain and institute the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and support those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His Church.*

*Now those who are regenerated have in them a twofold life, the one corporal and temporal, which they have from the first birth and is common to all men; the other, spiritual and heavenly, which is given them in their second birth, which is effected by the Word of the gospel, in the communion of the body of Christ; and this life is not common, but is peculiar to Gods elect. In like manner God has given us, for the support of the bodily and earthly life, earthly and common bread, which is subservient thereto and is common to all men, even as life itself. But for the support of the spiritual and heavenly life which believers have He has sent a living bread, which descended from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ, who nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers when they eat Him, that is to say, when they appropriate and receive Him by faith in the spirit.*

*In order that He might represent unto us this spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of His body, and wine as a sacrament of His blood, to testify by them unto us that, as certainly as we receive and hold this sacrament in our hands and eat and drink the same with our mouths, by which our life is afterwards nourished, we also do as certainly receive by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul) the true body and blood of Christ our only Saviour in our souls, for the support of our spiritual life.*

*Now, as it is certain and beyond all doubt that Jesus Christ has not enjoined to us the use of His sacraments in vain, so He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs, though the manner surpasses our understanding and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Spirit are hidden and incomprehensible. In the meantime we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ. But the manner of our partaking of the same is not by the mouth, but by the spirit through faith. Thus, then, though Christ always sits at the right hand of His Father in the heavens, yet does He not therefore cease to make us partakers of Himself by faith. This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of His sufferings and death: nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood.*

*Further, though the sacraments are connected with the thing signified nevertheless both are not received by all men. The ungodly indeed receives the sacrament to his condemnation, but he does not receive the truth of the sacrament, even as Judas and Simon the sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament but not Christ who was signified by it, of whom believers only are made partakers.*

*Lastly, we receive this holy sacrament in the assembly of the people of God, with humility and reverence, keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Saviour, with thanksgiving, making there confession of our faith and of the Christian religion. Therefore no one ought to come to this table without having previously rightly examined himself, lest by eating of this bread and drinking of this cup he eat and drink judgment to himself. In a word, we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love towards God and our neighbour.*

*Therefore we reject all mixtures and damnable inventions which men have added unto and blended with the sacraments, as profanations of them; and affirm that we ought to rest satisfied with the ordinance which Christ and His apostles have taught us, and that we must speak of them in the same manner as they have spoken.*

### **Comment**

The Lord's Supper is clearly ordained and instituted by our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. The event is recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, but is most clearly recounted by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26—

23 For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: 24 And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. 25 After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me. 26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.

What is the purpose of the Lord's Supper? At first sight, it seems to be no more than a memorial for us to remember our Saviour's death by. However, a closer our Lord's allusion to the Supper in the Gospel of John, as well as the inspired comments of Paul following his reference to the institution of the Supper lead us to think otherwise.

The Gospel of John is the only Gospel account which does not carry a record of the institution of the Lord's Supper; but is also the only account that records the Lord's Word pertaining to the need to partake His flesh and blood. It is difficult not to see a connection between what the Lord is saying and the Lord's Supper. He says:

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. 54 Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (Jn 6:53-54).

We do not think the Lord was speaking about literally ingesting the flesh and blood of Christ as Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism teach. But at the same time, we are persuaded that the Lord is not merely speaking metaphorically for the apostle Paul adds:

“Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (1 Cor 11:27-30).

If the Lord’s Supper were merely memorial, why should there be physical afflictions for those who partook unworthily?

We are led as such to agree with what we are given to confess in this article, namely, that the Lord Supper is instituted for the nourishment and support of those whom Christ has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His Church. The Lord’s Supper is a sacrament of nourishment just as Baptism is a sacrament of initiation.

It is important to understand that this nourishment pertains to our spiritual and heavenly life that begun at our new birth rather than to our earthly and bodily life. Thus the bread and wine do not become, or become infused with, the flesh and blood of Christ so that we partake of the flesh and blood of Christ bodily. Rather, while eat and drink the bread and wine at the Supper, we *“receive by faith... the true body and blood of Christ... in our souls, for the support of our spiritual life.”*

It is a mystery beyond our finite comprehension how Christ who is today in heaven by the right hand of the Father could communicate to us his flesh and blood. Nevertheless, we must insist that by the power of the Holy Spirit, real presence of Christ (or *“the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ”*) is made available to the faith of the worthy receiver at the Supper. In this way *“Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of His sufferings and death: nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood.”*

It should be noted furthermore,—on the basis of the apostle Paul’s warnings,—that the ungodly who partake of the sacrament do not partake Christ and his benefits. Rather they partake condemnation to themselves.

Likewise, those who would worthily partake of the Lord’s supper must take heed of the apostle’s instruction to examine themselves before coming to

the Table. Amongst other things we must examine ourselves our misery due to sin, our assurance of deliverance in Christ and of gratitude towards Christ Jesus for saving us by His death. In this way, *“we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love towards God.”* And since, we are to partake of the Supper in the *“assembly of the people of God”* with whom we must see it that we bear no grudges against, the Supper also move us to love our neighbours.

## Article XXXVI

### **The Magistracy (Civil Government)**

*We believe that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, has appointed kings, princes, and magistrates; willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies; to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency. For this purpose He has invested the magistracy with the sword for the punishment of evil-doers and for the protection of them that do well.*

*Their office is not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also to protect the sacred ministry, that the kingdom of Christ may thus be promoted. They must therefore countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honoured and worshipped by every one, as He commands in His Word.*

*Moreover, it is the bounden duty of every one, of whatever state, quality, or condition he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates; to pay tribute, to show due honor and respect to them, and to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God; to supplicate for them in their prayers that God may rule and guide them in all their ways, and that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity.*

*Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God has established among men.*

### **Comment**

The Word of God is clear that God's people are required to submit not only to ecclesiastical authority, but also to civil authorities. The apostle Paul writing under inspiration says to the Romans:

*“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake” (Rom 13:1-5).*

These words lead us to believe that it is the will of our gracious God to

appoint civil authorities in the world so that societies comprising fallen men may be governed *“by certain laws and policies”* and kept from chaos resulting from *“the dissoluteness of men.”* The authority of every legitimate government to punish evil-doers and to protect and reward those who do well comes from God who is King over all.

Since Christ Jesus is appointed the King of kings, and Lord of lords (Rev 19:16); and the Governor of the world (Heb 12:1-2), it follows that the office of civil authorities is *“not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also to protect the sacred ministry, that the kingdom of Christ may thus be promoted.”* This agrees with the words of the Lord to His people through the Prophet Isaiah: *“Kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers”* (Isa 49:23).

Thus we heartily confess,—as we are given in this article,—that all Civil Authorities must *...“countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honoured and worshipped by everyone, as He commands in His Word.”*

Such authorities as opposed to the preaching of the gospel sin against the God of heaven and earth and will be held accountable one day.

Nevertheless, it is *“bounden”* or the morally obligatory duty of everyone *“of whatever state, quality, or condition he may be”* to subject himself in the Lord to the magistrates, however wicked they may be. They are to *“obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God.”* They must pay their taxes, show due honour and respect to them, and pray for them that *“God may rule and guide them in all their ways, and that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity.”* This agrees with the inspired words of the apostle Paul:

*“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty”* (1 Tim 2:1-2).

## Article XXXVII

### The Last Judgment

*Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, when the time appointed by the Lord (which is unknown to all creatures) is come and the number of the elect complete, that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty to declare Himself Judge of the living and the dead, burning this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it.*

*Then all men will personally appear before this great Judge, both men and women and children, that have been from the beginning of the world to the end thereof, being summoned by the voice of the archangel, and by the sound of the trump of God. For all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived. As for those who shall then be living, they shall not die as the others, but be changed in the twinkling of an eye, and from corruptible become incorruptible. Then the books shall be opened, and the dead judged according to what they shall have done in this world, whether it be good or evil. Nay, all men shall give account of every idle word they have spoken, which the world only counts amusement and jest; and then the secrets and hypocrisy of men shall be disclosed and laid open before all.*

*And therefore the consideration of this judgment is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly, but most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect; because then their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labour and trouble which they have borne. Their innocence shall be known to all, and they shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked, who most cruelly persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world, and who shall be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences, and shall become immortal, but only to be tormented in the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels.*

*But on the contrary, the faithful and elect shall be crowned with glory and honour; and the Son of God will confess their names before God His Father and His elect angels; all tears shall be wiped from their eyes; and their cause which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious will then be known to be the cause of the Son of God. And for a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive.*

*Therefore we expect that great day with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN. Amen, come, Lord Jesus. Rev. 22:20.*

### Comment

This is the final article of the Belgic Confession. It is also one of the most beautiful. It is almost like a study of eschatology made up of a collage of

biblical data picked up from a plain reading of the Scriptures and then organised loosely. In this way, we see first of all that the Word of God does speak of a “Last Day.” This Last Day will clearly be of day of resurrection (cf. Jn 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24) and a day of judgment (Jn 12:48). It is the Day when Christ Jesus “whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things” (Acts 3:21) returns to judge the world (Ps 98:9; Acts 17:31; Mt 25:19; 31; Lk 17:30).

But when this day may be is “*unknown to all creatures.*” Even the Son of Man, at least when he was on earth, did not know the day (Mk 13:32; Mt 24:36).

We do, however, know that this is day will not come until the full number of the elect has been completed for the apostle Peter tells us that God “is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Clearly he is not saying that God is not willing that anyone in the world should perish for if that is the case, Christ will never come again. He must be saying, rather, that God is waiting for the full number of the elect to be converted.

On that Last Day Christ will return from heaven corporally and visibly not merely spiritually and invisibly. We know that because when the Lord ascended in the sight of his disciples, the angels said to them: “Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Indeed, the apostle Paul tells us that in that day, “the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God” (1 Th 4:16). There will be great glory and majesty for it is a day of judgement (Ps 45:3) in the which “the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Pet 3:10).

We do not know precisely what will happen in that day, but the Lord himself suggests that both the just and the unjust in their graves will be resurrected (Jn 5:28-29; cf. Dan 12:2). “*All men... both men and women and children, that have been from the beginning of the world to the end thereof*” will be raised to be judged (cf. Rv 20:12). Paul tells us that the dead in Christ, together with believers who are still alive then will ascend to meet the Lord Jesus in the air, presumably to escort Him back to earth in His triumphal re-entry as King as Judge who has conquered (cf. 1 Th 4:16-17; Mt 25:1, 6; Acts 38:15-16). We may presume that concurrently, the unjust in the grave will also be resurrected and the unjust who are still alive will also be changed; and then world would be renovated with fire

before the great judgement begins.

In so far as the resurrection is concerned, we may know that *“all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived.”* Were it not their own be a resurrection. However, it should be noted that by that we do not understand that the same molecules and cells of the person will be reunited to him, for our bodies are constantly changing at the molecular and cellular level as we breath, eat and drink, and grow and expend energy. Rather, we speak of the same body in the sense that the seed that is sown to the ground and the plant that grows up from it is the same body (1 Cor 15:37). In this light, we see how the Scriptures inform us that the elect will be raise with an incorruptible, glorious, powerful and spiritual body (1 Cor 15:42-44) fitted for a life of enjoying God evermore in the “Celestial City” (cf. 1Cor 15:40; Heb 11:16). On the other hand, the unjust in the grave will be resurrected with a corruptible body fitted for eternal torment.

In so far as the judgement is concerned, John tells us that the books will be opened (Rev 20:12) and all the dead will be judged; and Solomon reminds us that “God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Ecc 12:14). Indeed, the Lord Jesus declares that “every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment” (Mt 12:36). Thus we heartily confess that *“all men shall give account of every idle word they have spoken, which the world only counts amusement and jest; and then the secrets and hypocrisy of men shall be disclosed and laid open before all.”*

That day of judgement will thus be a terrible day of dread and fear for the wicked. In that day, God will execute *“terrible vengeance”* on the wicked *“who most cruelly persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.”*

It will be a day of vindication for God’s people who suffered persecution throughout history, such as during the time that the Belgic Confession was written! The wicked *“shall be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences.”* And they shall be tormented body and soul in “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt 25:41) in hell “where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched (Mk 9:44). Perhaps “their worm” refers to their evil conscience.

The consideration of this Day of Judgment, on the other hand, is *“most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect.”* Many happy promises will come true in that day. For examples, (1) Our *“full deliverance*

*shall be perfected*" (cf. Rom 8:23; Lk 21:28): we shall be freed from imperfection in body and soul; (2) We shall *"receive the fruits of [our] labour and trouble which [we] have borne": for we shall be given a gracious reward* (Mt 5:12; 10:42; Lk 6:35; Rev 22:12); (3) Our *"innocence shall be known to all"*: We shall be vindicated and acknowledged by the Son of God though we may *"now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious"* (Ps 135:14; Mt 10:32; Lk 12:8; Acts 7:55-56; Rev 3:5); (4) We *"shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked"* (Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30); (5) We shall be *"crowned with glory and honour"* (cf. 1Pt 1:7); (6) *"all tears shall be wiped from [our] eyes"* (Rev 7:17) and *"there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away"* (Rev 21:4); and (7) the Lord will cause us *"to possess such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive"* (1Cor 2:9; Rom 8:18).

We shall we do in the face of such glorious promises? Shall we not *"expect that great day with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Shall we not prepare for the day like the five wise virgins (Mt 25:ff)? Shall we not cry passionately with the apostle Paul, "Maranatha!" Come quickly, O Lord! Shall we not confess with the apostle John: "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20b)?