

LESSON 3

The Belgic Confession Introduction Articles 1 and 2

General:

In this lesson, we look at the general contents of the Belgic Confession, which will serve as further study guide, and we examine the opening articles.

1. The Set-up of the Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession, which contains 37 articles, has a recognizable, systematic scheme in which all the major points of the Reformed doctrine find a good place. The following, very global division may help to oversee the contents.

Note: With the following (difficult-sounding) words I do not mean to suggest that the Confession gives a full, systematic treatment (in a dogmatical sense) of each subject mentioned. I use this terminology only to show the similar line in the Confession and Reformed dogmatics.

- a) Theology: about God and His Revelation (Articles 1-11)
- b) Anthropology: about man, his creation and corruption (Articles 12-15)
- c) Christology: about the Lord Jesus Christ and the manner of salvation through Him – justification (Articles 16-26)
- d) Ecclesiology: about the Church and the gathering thereof – sanctification (Articles 27-36)
- e) Eschatology: about the Day of Judgment.

God – Man – Christ – Church – End

Especially in the sections b-d, we can discover the same basic line which is set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism:

*Sin (Misery) – Deliverance – Gratitude
Depravity – Justification – Sanctification*

2. The Introductory Clause

The opening sentence, "We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth," pertains not only to Article 1 but to *all* the articles of the Confession. The Creed is not "merely" a statement of doctrine, but fully a confession of *faith*.

This sentence is taken from Romans 10:10:

"For man believes with his heart, and so is justified, and confesses with his lips, and so is saved."

*Heart – Mouth
Faith – Confession*

3. The Existence of God (Articles 1 and 2)

We cannot "scientifically" prove the existence of God, although men like Anselm of Canterbury have tried to do so. Yet we can, out of the glory of creation, conclude to the majesty and wisdom of the Creator. Even more important, we read of God in His own self-revelation. We must *believe* the existence of God, and we have, also, every reason to do so.

We distinguish between:

- a) atheism: the belief that there is *no* God
- b) monotheism: the belief that there is only *one* God
- c) polytheism: the belief that there are *many* gods
- d) pantheism: the belief that everything has a divine character.

The Christian faith is essentially "monotheistic," confessing only one God, James 2:19.

4. The Attributes of God (Article 1)

God has made Himself known with many wonderful characteristics, which we call "attributes" – that which can be ascribed to God alone, even in contrast to man. Since these "attributes" are set in this contrast, they sound "negative" (e.g. in- visible: not-visible), but they are to be understood in a fully positive manner. Basically, God is so unique that there is no comparison possible.

Isaiah 40:18,25: "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with Him?"

We add the following notes:

- a) simple: God is Love, 1 John 4:8
- b) spiritual: not of material, created world
John 4:24, "God is spirit . . ."
- c) eternal: without beginning or end; immortal
Psalm 90:2, "From everlasting to everlasting, thou art God"
- d) incomprehensible: we cannot fully understand God's divine Being nor His greatest actions and deepest motives Isaiah 40:28, "His understanding is unsearchable."
- e) invisible: Colossians 1:15, "He – Christ – is the image of the invisible God"
- f) immutable: God does not "change" in His Being or character, but is eternally the same.
James 1:17, "The Father of lights with Whom there is no variation or shadow due to change"
- g) infinite: God cannot be limited or restricted
Psalm 139:7, "Whither shall I flee from Thy presence?"
- h) just: God deals according to His Law
Psalm 7:11, "God is a righteous judge"

- i) good: There is no "evil" in God.
Matthew 19:17, "One there is Who is good."
God's "goodness" is fully proven in the fact that He sent His Son to die for us on the cross of Golgotha (John 3:16).

5. The Knowledge of God (Article 2)

We distinguish between:

- a) agnosticism: the belief that God cannot be known at all
- b) scepticism: the belief that God cannot "truly" be known
- c) mysticism: the belief that God can fully be known.

The Reformed Churches confess that God can sufficiently be known in this life, as far as He has revealed Himself, and that God will be known perfectly after this life.

1 Corinthians 2:11, "So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God, except the Spirit of God."

1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror darkly, but then face to face."

We know God by two means:

- a) by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe.
Psalm 19:2, "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims His handiwork"
- b) by His holy and divine Word.
Psalm 19:7, "The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple."

God's manifestation in creation (which reveals His everlasting power and divinity) already leaves all men inexcusable, but knowledge of the Scriptures is necessary for salvation, Romans 10:14-17.

QUESTIONS (Lesson 3):

1. What is the basic set-up of the Belgic Confession?
2. Why can we not scientifically prove the existence of God?
3. What are the various "beliefs" concerning the existence of Divinity?
4. What do we mean by "the attributes" of God?
5. What do the Reformed Churches confess concerning the "knowledge of God"?
6. By what means do we know God? Which knowledge is essential for salvation?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory Work: Lord's Day 1, Heidelberg Catechism.

ARTICLE 3

THE WORD OF GOD

We confess that this Word of God *did not come by the impulse of man*, but that *men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God*, as the apostle Peter says. Thereafter, in His special care for us and our salvation, God 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.

ARTICLE 4

THE CANONICAL BOOKS

We believe that the Holy Scriptures consist of two parts, namely, the Old and the New Testament, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged. These books are listed in the Church of God as follows.

The books of the Old Testament: the five books of Moses, namely, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther; Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

The books of the New Testament: the four gospels, namely, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; the thirteen letters of the apostle Paul, namely, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon; the letter to the Hebrews; the seven other letters, namely, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude; and the Revelation to the apostle John.

ARTICLE 5

THE AUTHORITY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

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

ARTICLE 6

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CANONICAL AND APOCRYPHAL BOOKS

We distinguish these holy books from the apocryphal, namely, 3 and 4 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, additions to Esther, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men in the Furnace, Susannah, Bel and the Dragon, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. The Church may read and take instruction from these so far as they agree with the canonical books. They are, however, far from having such power and authority that we may confirm from their testimony any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less may they be used to detract from the authority of the holy books.

ARTICLE 7

THE SUFFICIENCY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length. It is therefore unlawful for any one, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scripture: yes, *even if it be an angel from heaven*, as the apostle Paul says. Since it is forbidden to add to or take away anything from the Word of God, it is evident that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects.

We may not consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with the 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 *lighter than a breath*. We therefore reject with all our heart whatever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us: *Test the spirits to see whether they are of God*. Likewise: *If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting*.