

LESSON 15

Belgic Confession Article 26 Intercession and Prayer

General:

In this lesson we examine the confession that only Christ intercedes for us in heaven as our only Advocate and that we must therefore approach the Father in His Name.

1. Intercession

As in the Heidelberg Catechism the explanation of the Law is followed by an explanation of the significance and contents of prayer, so the Belgic Confession also deals with "prayer" after "the Law." This is, again, done, as in Article 25, from out of the redeeming work of Christ, since His priestly office was at stake in the controversy with the Roman Catholic Church.

Since Christ alone is our only High Priest, Who sacrificed Himself for us on the cross of Golgotha, He is also the only One Who in heaven intercedes for us. He is the one Mediator and Advocate = one who speaks on our behalf and unites us with the Father. This article is clearly designed to refute the Romanist heresy that also "saints" can intercede for the believers.

The Roman Catholic Church ascribes the ministry of *reconciliation* only to Christ, but grants the ministry of *intercession* also to others. Even, the "abundant" good works of some are works of "supererogation" and can therefore be put to the benefit of others. Therefore, according to Rome, these "saints" are to be "adored" in varying degrees, with Mary, the mother of Christ and the Queen of heaven, receiving the greatest adoration. Rome tries to impress that this "adoration" is not to be seen as "worship," but in practice and principle *idolatry* does result.

The Scriptures teach conclusively that *only* Christ can and does intercede for us in heaven.

1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God, and there is *one Mediator* between God and men, the man Jesus Christ . . ."

Hebrews 9:24, "Christ has entered . . . into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."

NOTE: If there is any "intercession" from *our* side for one another, this also bases itself only on Christ's redeeming work and is a "praying for" one another.

1 Timothy 2:1, ". . . I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men . . ."

2. The Ascension and Intercession

Christ has already interceded for His Church also under the Old Testament (e.g. Zachariah 1:12), and when He was on earth in humiliation (John 17), but this intercession now takes full effect and significance, since He has ascended into heaven after having completed His atoning work (Hebrews 8:1, 2).

The *fact* of the ascension (and the *exaltation* it included for Christ) may not deter or keep us from seeking all help in Him alone. Even though Christ has been appointed as judge and will come to judge the living and the dead, this Mediator "should not frighten us by His greatness, so that we look for another according to our fancy" (Article 24). His present glory does not change His existing *love* for us, but we should take all the more courage from His power and majesty.

The Confession also points out that the adoration of "saints" is basically a "distrust" of Christ and a dishonouring of the "saints" themselves, for they never assumed such a position as is now ascribed to them by the Roman Catholic Church.

When the Bible speaks of "saints" (e.g. Epistle to the Philippians 1:1) it simply means those who have been "sanctified" by Christ as members of His Church.

3. Our Prayer

The Scriptures emphasize that we can only go to the Father *in Christ*, through His blood, on the basis of His merits.

Hebrews 10:9, "We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus."

John 16:23, "... if you ask anything of the Father, He will give it to you in *My Name*"

We have only one surety to believe that God will hear our prayer: the sacrifice and Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a very certain basis on which we may place full trust and confidence.

John 16:13, "Whatever you ask in *My Name*, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

The requirements for prayer are further described in Lord's Day 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism,

- a) correct address: we call only upon the one true God as He has revealed Himself in His Word
- b) correct contents: we ask for all that He has commanded us to ask of Him; our prayer must be in line with His promises
- c) correct humility: we must have knowledge of our misery, so that we do not "presume" upon God in prayer
- d) true faith: we must be firmly assured that God will certainly hear us only for the sake of Christ, according to His Promise.

Hebrews 11:6, "For whoever would draw near to God, must believe that He exists, and that He rewards those who seek Him." [See also: James 2:5-8].

4. The Lord's Prayer

In concluding, Article 26, the Confession refers to "the Lord's prayer." This prayer was given in answer to the explicit request of the disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1ff.). This prayer is a perfect example of *how* the Father wishes to be approached by His children.

This prayer in many ways runs parallel with the Law of God: we pray for the fulfillment of this Law in our life and in this world.

In this prayer we ask for "all the things we need for body and soul," i.e., whatever we need to serve God gratefully in a life of holiness.

Since prayer is the essential element in the communion with God, it is called "the most important part of the thankfulness which God requires of us" (Heidelberg Catechism, Question 116). The Scriptures exhort us to pray "constantly" and "unceasingly" (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 and 18), and thus to make known both our needs and thankfulness before God. Only in this living communion with God do we receive His grace and Spirit.

QUESTIONS (Lesson 15):

1. How does the Confession approach the matter of "prayer"?
2. Why is Christ called our only "Advocate"?
3. Against which doctrine does the Confession speak out here?
4. In what way do we "intercede" for one another?
5. Why should the fact of Christ's exaltation not deter us from seeking in Him all intercession?
6. What does the Bible mean by "saints"?
7. What is the only basis for our prayer?
8. What requirements does God maintain with respect to our prayers?
9. Why is prayer called "the most important part of the thankfulness" which God asks of us?

ASSIGNMENT:

Memory Work: Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 49, 116, 117, 119.

ARTICLE 27

THE CATHOLIC OR UNIVERSAL CHURCH

We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

This Church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy Church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man. Thus during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord kept for Himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal.

Moreover, this holy Church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.

ARTICLE 28

EVERYONE'S DUTY TO JOIN THE CHURCH

We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his state or quality may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the Church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.

To observe this more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the Church and to join this assembly wherever God has established it. They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow.

All therefore who draw away from the Church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

ARTICLE 29

THE MARKS OF THE TRUE AND THE FALSE CHURCH

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true Church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of Church. We are not speaking here of the hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church along with the good and yet are not part of the Church, although they are outwardly in it. We are speaking of the body and the communion of the true Church which must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the Church.

The true Church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head. Hereby the true Church can certainly be known and no one has the right to separate from it.

Those who are of the Church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him.

The false church assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God. It does not want to submit itself to the yoke of Christ. It does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in His Word, but adds to them and subtracts from them as it pleases. It bases itself more on men than on Jesus Christ. It persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke the false church for its sins, greed, and idolatries.

These two Churches are easily recognized and distinguished from each other.