

THE
BELGIC
CONFESSION

A COMMENTARY

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A COMMENTARY



VOLUME 2

DAVID J. ENGELSMA



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To Ruth

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Guido De Bres

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PREFACE

With the publication of volume two is completed a Reformed, full-scale, commentary on the Belgic Confession, of which there are only a few in English today. This book is not a summary of the Confession, nor a compilation of sermons loosely based on the Confession, but a commentary. It explains the Confession, article by article, doctrine by doctrine.

Volume one concluded with the explanation of article 21 of the Confession, the last article on the doctrine of Christ.

Volume two begins with the Confession's opening article on the doctrine of salvation, continues with the Confession's lengthy treatment of the doctrine of the church, and concludes with the Confession's explanation of the doctrine of the last things—eschatology.

To specify articles and doctrines in this section of the Belgic Confession as being especially important would be foolish, if not foolhardy. But, in view of both its intrinsic and church-historical significance, as well as its controversial nature at present in almost all conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches, one may certainly call attention to the Reformed creed's treatment of justification in articles 22 and 23. Also article 24, even though expressly confessing the Reformed doctrine of sanctification, shines

bright light on the truth of justification: “though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them.”¹

The Confession’s doctrine of the church addresses a number of hotly debated issues. Articles 27 and 28 raise the question of the church’s relation as the universal body of the elect and the church as local congregation, that is, the church as instituted. Answering the question necessitates recognizing that some today stress the universal body of Christ to the disparagement of the local congregation, while others insist upon the reality of the local congregation as to do away with the universal body of Christ. Article 29 confronts the Reformed and Protestant believer with the reality of the true church and the false church, and with the practical urgency of his church membership. Articles 33–35 are a testimony to the Reformed faith’s profound, genuinely mystical, unique, and often under-appreciated theology of the sacraments. Whereas the sacramental controversy with Rome is irremediable, a right understanding of the Reformed faith’s doctrine of the sacraments ought to lessen the opposition on the part of Lutheranism.

Article 36, on the civil magistracy, stands alone in the Confession in its difficulty and dubiety. The article’s qualifying footnote, once added by the Christian Reformed Church and still today, apparently, in force in the Protestant Reformed Churches, is indicative of both the difficulty and the doubtfulness of the long line in the article that posits a calling of the magistrate to enforce the right worship of God. Debate among the Reformed and Presbyterians

1 Belgic Confession 24, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:412.

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regarding this dubious doctrine of the civil state has usually centered on whether the civil magistrate is called to enforce both tables of the decalogue or only the second table. This commentary cuts the Gordian knot. It also asks for a gravamen.

Commentary on the last article, the Reformed doctrine of eschatology, confronts the commentator and the reader with the awesome truth of the end; including the coming of Jesus, the resurrection, the final judgment, and the new world. It also raises the controversial issue of the millennium, a lively issue in Presbyterian and Reformed circles at the beginning of the twenty-first century, contending that the article itself, despite its lack of an explicit treatment of the subject, nevertheless commits the Reformed theologian and believer to amillennialism.

Enough has been said to underscore volume two's significance, not only for the Reformed Christian, but also for every Protestant. The Belgic Confession's importance, not only for the Reformed faith in the Netherlands, but also for Dutch Protestantism is recognized by the historians. In his massive, monumental history of the Dutch Republic, Jonathan Israel has written:

A development of particular importance [for "Calvinism in the Low Countries"] was the drawing up of what became known as the Netherlands Confession of Faith (*Confessio Belgica*) by Guy de Brès, preacher of the Calvinist congregation at Valenciennes, in 1561, and its rapid acceptance as the creed of the Reformed congregations throughout the Netherlands. The text exerted a powerful impact

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not only during the early rise of Calvinism in the Low Countries but, as a cultural and educational tool, throughout the subsequent history of Dutch Protestantism. The first Dutch edition was printed at Emden, early in 1562, eloquent testimony to the pivotal role of East Friesland in the onset of the Dutch Reformation.²

Regarding the intriguing cover of the volume, this is explained in the preface of volume one.

David J. Engelsma
October 2018

² Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 104.



Chapter Sixteen

JUSTIFYING FAITH, AND JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

(ARTICLE 22)

ART. XXII. OF OUR JUSTIFICATION THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Ghost kindleth 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 without works. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself

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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.

INTRODUCTION

With article 22 begins the section of the Belgic Confession that sets forth the Reformed doctrine of salvation in its essentials. The doctrine of salvation, or soteriology, teaches the actual saving of elect sinners by the work of the Spirit of Christ within themselves. This section of the Confession begins in article 22 with saving faith; continues with justification (art. 23), sanctification (art. 24), and the abolishing of the ceremonial law (art. 25); and concludes with the intercession of Christ (art. 26).

It is immediately obvious that the Belgic Confession is not a complete dogmatics, or treatise of theology. Indeed, it is not even a thorough confession of the Reformed faith. It begins its treatment of salvation with faith, rather than with regeneration (the new birth) and calling. In a thorough, well-worked-out, theological “order of salvation” that lists all the benefits of salvation, the Confession would ordinarily include regeneration, calling, faith, conversion, justification, sanctification, preservation, and glorification. The Confession is not a book of dogmatics, although all sound Reformed theology has the Confession as its authoritative guide and standard. In addition, all aspects of biblical, Reformed doctrine are implied by the Belgic Confession. For example, the Confession’s derivation of all of

salvation from election and ascription of all of salvation to the sovereign working of the Holy Ghost implies the preservation and glorification of every believer.

Nevertheless, the content of the Confession must be complemented by the other two creeds of the Reformed churches, especially the Canons of Dordt. The Canons have an entire chapter on regeneration and conversion.¹ The addition of this explicit explanation of regeneration and conversion to the Reformed confessional basis proved necessary in view of the heresy of Arminianism. Arminianism taught, and teaches still, that the actual saving of the sinner is his own work inasmuch as his salvation depends upon his believing, and believing is the act of his own free will. According to the Arminian heresy, a variation and development of the ancient heresy of Pelagianism, the sinner's regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification depend upon the sinner himself fulfilling the condition of believing, or faith, by his own supposed ability of free will.

In fact, article 22 of the Belgic Confession condemns this Arminian heresy by confessing that "the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith." Faith does not lie in the natural power of sinners' supposed free will. The salvation of sinners, beginning with the new birth, is not conditioned upon the believing of sinners by their supposed free will.

Despite this important statement in the Belgic Confession, it was only with the Canons of Dordt, some sixty years after the writing of the Belgic Confession, that the Reformed churches established that regeneration precedes faith and that faith is the gift of God. Therefore, no one

1 Canons of Dordt 3–4, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:587–92.

can believe who has not been born again by the sovereign, gracious work of God the Holy Ghost. The Canons develop more fully and state more clearly the truth that the Belgic Confession briefly expresses in the words, “The Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith.”

It should also be noted by way of introduction that there is significant overlap between articles 22 and 23. Although article 22 concentrates on faith, it also includes fundamental explanation of justification. The heading of the article in the old Latin edition of the Confession, which is translated and used in this commentary, does justice to this overlap of article 22 with article 23: “Justifying Faith and Justification by Faith.” Even though the outstanding aspect of the Reformed faith that is treated in article 22 is faith, the article expands its scope to include the saving work of justification. It explains justification: “Jesus Christ, imputing to us all his merits,” etc. It employs the well-known theme of the Protestant Reformation: “justified by faith alone.” The subject also of article 23 is our justification before the face of God.

The relation between the articles is that article 22 confesses the truth about faith. True faith embraces Christ and his righteousness so that it is impossible to treat faith without also treating to some extent of faith’s righteousness, that is, the righteousness that is in Christ. It is no more possible to speak of faith without also speaking of justification than it would be to explain the sun without speaking also of light. Article 23 then continues and completes the teaching about justification. It explains more fully what justification is, spells out the benefits of justification, and warns against the perennial threats to the true doctrine of justification.

THE NATURE OF TRUE FAITH

The Confession deliberately describes the faith that it is explaining as “true.” The English translation is “upright.” But the French original is *vraie*, that is, “true.” The word is the same as that translated “very” in article 19 concerning Jesus: “VERY GOD and VERY MAN,” by which is meant, “true God and true man.” Jesus is true, or genuine, God and true, or genuine, man. Implied by the word “true,” or “very,” in article 22, is that there are also false faiths and that Reformed believers must be careful to distinguish the true from the false. False, or spurious, faiths are religious and spiritual mental states, determinations, and emotions or excitements that claim to be faith and seem to be faith but are not true faith. Article 24 of the Confession refers to a “vain faith.” This is a spurious faith that fails to produce any good works in the life of the one who claims to have faith. It is what James calls a “dead” faith in chapter 2:17, 20.

Then, there is a false faith that is nothing more than religious excitement, pious feeling, a stirring of the emotions in response to the truths of the gospel. This is the faith of the “convert” at the typical evangelistic crusade, where the preaching of the gospel of grace is not the power of God unto salvation, but where the lively music, emotional testimonies, and dramatic flourishes of a charismatic orator are the power of man unto a cheap decision for Christ. As Jesus warned in Matthew 13:20–21, even where the gospel is preached there will be those who at first immediately receive the gospel with joy. But they last only for a while. They endure in this false faith only temporarily. Of such hearers of the word, Jesus says in Luke 8:13 that they “for a

while believe.” Invariably, this false faith shows itself exactly in that it does not endure. It has no root in the deep, rich soil of the doctrine of the gospel. It floats on the shallow surface of fickle religious emotions and experiences.

There is also the false faith exposed implicitly by article 22 of the Belgic Confession. All faith in religious people—*church* people—that does not find all of salvation in Jesus Christ alone but finds and relies on something else in addition to Jesus is false faith. That on which false faith relies may be works of the sinner himself; works of Mary; the intercession of saints; a decision for Christ on the part of the sinner’s supposed free will; or the mere fact of having been born to believing parents.

Whatever the exact nature of this faith may be, it is false faith. It is not genuine faith that merely has made a mistake in religion. False faith does not become genuine faith inasmuch as the Reformed believer adopts the attitude that we must broadmindedly accept differences in religion. All faith that does not know the great mystery of Christ’s death as satisfaction, that seeks something more besides him, and that asserts that Christ is not sufficient is not true faith. It has not been kindled by the Holy Ghost. It does not justify and therefore does not save.

This searing judgment is clearly implied by the Confession’s careful description of true faith, its saving power, and its benefits. This judgment on false faiths is expressed when the Confession exclaims that to say that Christ—Christ *alone*—is not sufficient but that something more is required is “too gross a blasphemy.”

The same identification of false faith, and severe judgment upon it, is found in the Heidelberg Catechism. In its confession that Jesus is the savior, the Catechism declares

that “no salvation is to be either sought or found in any other.” It goes on to deny that those “who seek their salvation and welfare of saints, of themselves, or any where else” do “believe in the only Saviour Jesus.” The ground of this judgment of the Catechism is the same as that given by the Belgic Confession in article 22: “For either Jesus is not a complete Saviour, or they who by true faith receive this Saviour must have in him all that is necessary to their salvation.”²

So serious is the controversy of the gospel of salvation by grace alone with the false gospel of salvation dependent upon, or conditioned by, some work of the sinner himself. It is the difference between the true gospel and a false gospel. This, according to the Confession, is the difference between the gospel and “blasphemy,” implying the difference between salvation and damnation.

Therefore, the Reformed believer must pay careful attention to the characteristics of true faith. He must be perfectly clear as to what true faith is and how it differs from the various false faiths, especially the false faith that finds Christ insufficient for salvation.

Fundamentally, true faith is union with Jesus Christ—real, spiritual union with Christ. Modern evangelicalism, which is for the most part Arminian, has virtually hidden this basic truth about faith. For contemporary evangelicalism, faith is fundamentally activity—some act of the sinner: making a decision for Christ; coming to the front of some auditorium; raising his hands as a sign of accepting Jesus; or having some strong feeling. Even Reformed theologians

² Heidelberg Catechism Q 29, Q&A 30, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:317.

commonly overlook the fundamental nature of faith, regarding faith exclusively as the activity of believing.

Although the Confession does justice to faith's spiritual activity, it also indicates that faith is union with Christ. "Faith which *embraces* Jesus Christ...[and] appropriates him" (emphasis added). An embrace is union, like the embrace of a husband and wife. Appropriation implies the closest communion with the Savior. The Confession adds: "Faith is an instrument that keeps us in *communion* with him" (emphasis added). True faith is a spiritual bond that unites us with, and implants us into, Jesus Christ, just as a branch is grafted into the tree or vine. When the Spirit first kindles faith in the heart of the elect, in the language of the Confession, he unites the elect with Christ. This uniting of the elect sinner with Christ takes place at the moment of regeneration.

This initial kindling of faith that unites with the Savior can and often does take place in elect children of believers, when they are very young, or even still in the womb of their mothers. Thus they too are saved, and are saved by faith, although their faith is not yet a conscious believing on the Savior. Before the prophet Jeremiah was born, God sanctified him in his mother's womb (Jer. 1:5). When John the Baptist was still in Elizabeth's womb, he leaped for joy at the presence of Jesus (Luke 1:44). Only one who was united to the Savior would have responded to the presence of the Savior in this manner. It is this truth about faith, with the covenantal promise of salvation for the children of believers, that underlies the Reformed confession that believing parents have no reason to fear concerning the salvation of their very young, and even unborn, children who

die in infancy.³ Not only does God’s election touch them, but also these children are saved by faith.

Evidence in scripture that faith is fundamentally union with Christ is abundant. Some passages are explicit. The saints are those who are “faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1), where the meaning is that they are faithful in their (faith) relationship with Christ, virtually, that their being in union with Christ Jesus by faith renders them faithful. Ephesians 3:17 views faith as the bond of the child of God from the point of view of the bonding Christ: “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.” Faith is Christ’s bond with us, or indwelling.

In fact, all the innumerable statements by Paul that the saved are “in Christ”—one of the main themes of the apostle—are descriptions of faith as a bond of union with Christ, even though the word “faith” is not always used. An example is Ephesians 2:22: “In whom [the Lord Jesus], ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” This “inness” is faith as a bond. Because faith is a bond of union and communion with Christ, by this faith we are the dwelling place, or habitation, of God. By faith as a bond, not only is the believer in Christ Jesus, but also God is in the believer. He is the habitation of God.

Ignoring that the passage emphasizes the possibility of a false faith, John 15:1–10 teaches that faith is the union, or bond, of a branch in Christ as the vine. It is one’s being in Christ with an abiding “inness,” or bond. Such is the union that one having true faith will certainly bear fruit. Such is

3 Canons of Dordt 1.17, in *ibid.*, 3:585.

the union that the very life of Christ in him, indeed, Christ himself in him, produces fruit in his life.

FAITH AS ACTIVITY

This bond with Christ necessarily becomes vigorous activity. True faith is spiritual activity, according to the Confession. It is the activity of knowing Christ Jesus as savior and of relying upon, or trusting in, him for salvation. It is the activity of knowing and trusting in Jesus Christ *alone*. The Confession begins by defining the activity of faith as knowledge, that is, the knowledge of Christ as savior in the work of the cross of satisfying the justice of God, as this justice of God was set forth in article 22: “We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith.” The “great mystery” is that Christ’s suffering and death were his satisfaction of the justice of God on behalf of God’s elect people (see art. 16), as confessed in the preceding article. Faith is “true *knowledge*” of this mystery (emphasis added). It is not mindless feeling, or coming to the front of an auditorium full of ignorant passion, or making a decision for Christ that is driven by emotion.

The activity of faith is knowledge—intellectual, doctrinal knowledge. It is *true* knowledge and therefore a knowledge of the heart that “embraces Jesus Christ...[and] appropriates him,” as well as a knowledge of the head that ascertains the truth about him as taught by the Bible. But it is knowledge. The contemporary disparagement of doctrine and doctrinal knowledge by Reformed churches, in favor of mindless emotionalism and of the Christian life (as though the Christian life can exist, much less flourish, without faith) finds no support in the Reformed

confessions. Disparaging knowledge, these churches disparage faith, the faith by which alone there is salvation. An ignorant Christianity is not only a Christianity without root in the Christian tradition, but also a Christianity without faith.

That faith is knowledge, according to the Reformed confession, implies something concerning the ministry of the true church, particularly the preaching of the church. The preaching must instruct. To do this, the preaching must be doctrinal. Only such preaching is the means by which Christ Jesus works the knowledge that is faith. Only such preaching is the means by which the Holy Ghost “kindleth faith.” Non-doctrinal preaching may excite and please the audience. It may be popular. But it does not accomplish, maintain, or increase the kindling of faith. It is not the power of the Spirit of Christ to accomplish an embrace of Jesus Christ with all his benefits. It does not save.

One of the clearest evidences of the apostasy of Reformed, indeed Protestant, churches in the twenty-first century is not only the lack of doctrinal preaching, but also the conscious, determined *rejection* of preaching that is (soundly) doctrinal. The time has come when congregations, ministers, and seminaries “will not endure sound doctrine.” Thus they “turn away their ears from the truth.” Instead, on a Sunday morning they all “turned unto fables.” The calling of the true church and faithful preacher, in contrast, is to “exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:1–5).

The activity of true faith is not only knowledge. It is also reliance upon, or trust in, Jesus Christ. Article 22 of the Confession expresses this aspect of faith when it states that true faith “seeks nothing more besides him.” Faith

depends upon Jesus Christ for all of salvation. Article 23, which continues the exposition of article 22, describes faith as a “relying and resting upon” Jesus Christ. This is trusting in him. Although trust is a second, distinct element of true faith, it is implied in faith’s knowledge. One who knows Jesus Christ with true knowledge will put his trust in Jesus for all his salvation, just as a little child, knowing the love and power of his earthly father, will trust in this father for all things earthly. When all things in a Christian family are as they ought to be, this trust of a small child is moving: “My dad can do it; my father will do it.” So also is the trust of the believer similarly moving: Abraham as he raised the knife to sacrifice his only child, upon whom the promise of the Messiah rested; Joshua as he entered the land of Canaan, as it were an armed camp; Daniel’s three friends as they entered the fiery furnace; Paul as he went out with the gospel into a world that hated God; every believer as he or she buries a loved one who died in Christ, in the hope of the resurrection—“My Savior can do it; my Savior will do it.”

In its activity, true faith knows Christ *only* and relies on Christ *only*. This is the implication of the words “and seeks nothing more besides him.” The subject is salvation: “Those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him.”

For true faith, in the great matter of salvation, the sole object is Jesus Christ. For true faith, it is not Christ *and...*; Christ *and myself, my will, my works*; Christ *and the church*; Christ *and Mary*; Christ *and circumcision*; Christ *and my decision for him*. For true faith, it is Christ *alone*. Thus faith honors Jesus Christ and the triune God who sent this Christ and who reveals himself in this Christ. Faith knows Christ

as the complete savior. This is the point of the Confession's argument in the article: "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."

The argument may be explained this way: true faith, by having Christ alone as object, acknowledges that all things pertaining to salvation are in him, so that by faith alone in him the believer has complete salvation.

On the other hand, the false faith that looks to and trusts in something or someone besides or in addition to Christ Jesus denies that Jesus is a sufficient savior. This is a blasphemous denial of Jesus: "too gross a blasphemy." This is to call Jesus "but half a Saviour." Such a false faith does not save. Only true faith is saving. Half a Savior will not suffice for our salvation. He would give only half a salvation. We are in need of a complete salvation. It is precisely the warning of Paul in Galatians 5:2-4 that "to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides him" is Christ-denying heresy:

2. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.
3. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.
4. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.

The apostle does not here condemn a pagan substitution of some human deed in the place of Christ's work. But he condemns an error to which Christian churches and

theologians are prone: the addition of a human work to the work of Christ as necessary for salvation. To add the smallest work of the sinner himself, in this case circumcision, to the obedience of Christ as required for salvation, particularly for the saving act of justification, is to forfeit Christ altogether. Inasmuch as faith alone receives Christ in the fullness of his saving work, the sin is adding some human work to faith for the reception of Christ's salvation: *faith and circumcision*. Christ is become of no saving effect whatever to one who looks to and trusts in something else in addition to Christ for salvation. The truth of the gospel is: Christ *alone*, by faith only. Denial of "Christ alone" is rejection of Christ altogether.

THE SAVING POWER OF TRUE FAITH

Such is the saving nature of true faith that faith is a most wonderful spiritual faculty and activity. In the language of the Confession, faith "embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits, appropriates him." "Through faith," believers "possess Jesus Christ [and]...complete salvation." True faith takes hold of the risen Jesus Christ himself and all of the salvation that is in him, all his merits and all his benefits, justification but also sanctification.

The Confession is at pains to guard against the notion that the activity itself of believing is the salvation of the believing child of God. With regard particularly to the benefit of justification, the Confession, having recognized that this justification is by faith and by faith alone, is quick to add that "we do not mean that faith itself justifies us." Rather, "faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with him [Jesus Christ] in all his benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our