

**BELIEVING and
CONFESSING**

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365 Meditations
on the Belgic
Confession



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The Belgic Confession is one of the four best-known Reformation-inspired confessions: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dordrecht, and the Westminster Confession of Faith. It is part of the creedal basis for Reformed Churches around the world.

The Belgic Confession was written by an itinerant preacher named Guido de Brès. He left Roman Catholicism and preached the truths of the Reformation with great courage in the Lowlands, comprised of what is now Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The date of the Confession is 1561, a date that places this confession as the first of the four mentioned above.

The occasion for the Confession was the bitter persecution of Protestants in the Lowlands by the cruel Roman Catholic Church. The Spaniards especially, under whose rule the people in the Lowlands lived, were the agents of persecution. The excuse for persecution was that the Protestants were rebels in the kingdom and enemies of the authority of their rulers. The confession was written to prove this charge to be false: the Protestants were no rebels guilty of treason but were lowly people of God who would obey their rulers in all things except what was contrary to the will of God revealed in the Scriptures.

They were determined to be faithful to their God and were ready to “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire, well knowing that those who follow Christ must take his cross and deny themselves”^{*} rather than deny the truth of God’s word, expressed in this confession. The confession breathes the spirit of martyrdom.

Guido de Brès wrote the confession to show that those who opposed the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church were not guilty of treason but were only being faithful to Scripture, and therefore their persecution was unjust. In 1562, a copy was sent to the Spanish king with the hope and prayer that persecution would be eased. But King Philip II paid no attention to the plea. Guido de Brès himself was a martyr; he was publicly hanged when he was forty-seven years old.

The Confession treats the truths of Scripture systematically, following the order in the six loci of Dogmatics: Theology, Anthropology, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, Eschatology.

It is a living testimony of the power of faith in the lives of the people of God and a living record of the truth for which they died. May that same courage of faith be ours.

Herman Hanko

* Quoted 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), 2:505. All the quotations of the Belgic Confessions that appear in this book are from Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:383-436.



Article 1

THERE IS ONE ONLY 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.

Read: Isaiah 40:21–28

The Belgic Confession properly and importantly begins with the truth concerning God. All the faith of believers begins with God and ends with God. It begins with God because all the truth is only what God himself has said about himself: his divine being, his attributes, his works that he performs. And all the truth ends with God, because all the truth is revealed by God so that God may receive all the glory that is due to himself alone.

The world is full of theologies, but they are theologies that are about many things other than God. Arminianism is man-centered and talks only about what man can do to save himself, thus robbing God of his glory. A social theology is concerned with making this world a better place to live, a sort of heaven here on earth. A prosperity gospel is interested only in telling people how to become rich in this world's goods. And so the list goes on. The truth that is confessed, if it is based on Scripture, is God-centered. It is about God.

Calvin was accused of being drunk with God. He never considered that remark to be an insult, but readily acknowledged that he was interested only in God and his glory. *Soli Deo Gloria* was his motto.

Only if we begin and end with God will we also be guarded from error. If one has the doctrine of God correct, as that doctrine is taught in the holy Scriptures, he will never stray from the path of truth. But the opposite is also true: if one strays in any doctrine of Scripture, one says something wrong about God as well.

Although the Confession deals with many different doctrines—in fact, with all the doctrines of Scripture—all these doctrines are only different aspects of the truth concerning God. The Bible is, after all, the infallibly inspired record of the revelation of God who seeks always and only the glory of his great and holy name.

Let us also seek the glory of God in our thoughts as we contemplate the wonders of what God has done and as we seek to understand the truth revealed in the Scriptures. Many, not understanding well the central truth concerning God, plead for less doctrine and more practical teaching. This is wrong. The knowledge of God is eternal life and therefore everlasting blessedness. The Belgic Confession is intended to say to all the world: “These truths are the truths of Scripture and of our salvation. For them we are ready to die.”

Herman Hanko

Read: Romans 10

What the church confesses to be the truth of God, the church also believes with its heart and confesses with its mouth. The reference here is to Romans 10:9. The truth of God is what “we all believe in the heart, and confess with the mouth.”

We believe this truth, not as we believe a history book—that is, that the facts in the book actually happened—but we believe in our hearts. We believe such that we know the God revealed in the Scriptures to be our God and covenant friend.

We know God through Jesus Christ, for God has given us an infallible record of his revelation in Jesus Christ. God is revealed, therefore, as the God of our salvation in his own Son.

But when we know Christ through the Scriptures, the infallible record of God’s revelation in Christ, then it is not as if we know about him, as we would know about a famous person from a biography of him; but we know Jesus Christ personally and experientially so that we have fellowship with him, and through him, with God.

Believing the truth of God’s word, we confess it with our mouths. We cannot be silent about that which we believe with our hearts, for such a belief is more important to us than anything else, and we want all the world to know about it.

It is true that the Belgic Confession was written to prove to the Roman Catholic persecutors of the churches in the Lowlands that what they believed was Biblical doctrine and not treasonous propaganda. But the fact remains that the believer cannot help but bear witness of his faith. He is excited about it, moved by the wonder of it, thankful that God has, through Christ, saved him, an undeserving sinner. We may very well ask ourselves the question whether this excitement and wonder are true of us, for frequently we take what we believe for granted.

But the believer also knows that he is called by God to be a witness to the world, of the faith he holds dear. So he confesses that truth. He confesses it with his mouth and with his life. Even when he knows that the consequences of his confession will be persecution, he does not waver in his confession.

May God give us all the grace to be faithful witnesses.

Herman Hanko

Read: Deuteronomy 6:1–6

Article 1 of the Belgic Confession speaks of all of God's attributes. The first attribute is found in the words: "there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God."

God is, first of all, a spiritual being. He is not material as is this world in which we live. Nor is he spiritual in the sense that heaven and all the creatures in heaven are spiritual. Heaven is not made up of material substance nor filled with material creatures. We cannot see heaven, nor can we see angels. We could not see heaven even if we were in heaven, unless we were changed. Angels can be seen only when they appear, that is, take on a form that makes them visible to us men.

But God is not even spiritual in the sense of heavenly things. While this is totally beyond our understanding, God is pure spirit. Even those in heaven cannot see God, though they are spirits, too. God is seen in heaven only when he reveals himself in Jesus Christ. "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim. 1:17).

John 4:24 teaches us how we must worship in such a way that the greatness of God is preserved in our worship: "God is a Spirit[better translated, "God is Spirit"]: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." We are able to know him because we are created with a spirit (1 Thess. 5:23).

The article also mentions God's attribute of simplicity: "There is only one simple and spiritual Being." God's simplicity means, first, that he is the only God. This was written against all polytheism, which teaches that there are many gods, or that there is one god, who becomes many different gods.

But if God is all-powerful, there cannot be two gods, for there cannot be two all-powerful beings.

Further, God's simplicity means that God is not composed of parts and cannot be divided into parts. God must not be defined as being three in person, with each person possessing one third of the divine being. Nor are God's attributes characteristics of different parts of God. God's attributes are one. His mercy is his justice. His love is his grace. He is one simple being.

No wonder when we pray to such a great God, we bow in reverence and fear before him.

Herman Hanko

Read: Isaiah 40:12–31

When I attended grammar school, my teacher tried to teach us the difference between time and eternity. She drew a circle on the blackboard and said that the circle represented eternity because the line that composed the circle was without beginning and without end. But when she explained time, she drew two lines through the line that made a circle and said, “This is time, for the arc has a beginning and an end.”

I didn’t like the illustration very much when she used it, and I like it still less now. Time is not a segment of eternity. Eternity is fundamentally different from time. It is true that eternity is without beginning and without end, while time has a beginning and an end. But God is the creator of time and is not bound by time. We are creatures of time who cannot escape from it.

God, the Eternal One, is changeless, while we, creatures of time, change. “Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away,”* we sing in Psalm 90. Or, to quote an old poet: “Change and decay in all around I see; O Thou who changest not, abide with me.”**

We cannot comprehend eternity, for we are too bound by the chains of time. We cannot conceive of someone who has no beginning and no end. But the wonder of salvation for us is that we shall be given an inheritance in heaven that is truly everlasting; it has no end—although it does have a beginning.

We tend to confuse eternal and everlasting, but this is a mistake. Only God is eternal; our life in heaven is everlasting.

God created time, and God is the sovereign ruler of time. God controls time sovereignly and so controls all that happens in time. Although the Scriptures say that in heaven time shall be no more, this does not mean that we become eternal. “Eternal” is an attribute of God that we shall never possess.

God’s eternity makes him so much different from the creature that he is worthy of all our praise. We serve and love a God who is not made with human hands, as the idols of the heathen are, but is the only Eternal One. He alone must be worshipped and served.

Herman Hanko

* No. 247:5, in *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and added Chorale Section*, reprinted and revised edition of the 1912 United Presbyterian Psalter (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1927; rev. ed. 1995).

** From the hymn “Abide With Me,” by Henry Francis Lyte (1793–1847).

Read: Romans 11:33–36

Although the sacred Scriptures are the infallible record of God’s revelation to us, given so that we may know him, the Scriptures also constantly remind us that what we know of God is very little, for he is infinitely greater than his own revelation in the Scriptures.

Job says, “Behold, God is great, and we know him not, neither can the number of his years be searched out” (Job 36:26).

Isaiah proclaims in wonder at God’s own word concerning himself: “Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding” (Isa. 40:28).

God’s word through Jeremiah is: “Am I a God at hand, saith the LORD, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD” (Jer. 23:23–24). And Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple, “The heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?” (1 Kings 8:27).

God is so great that he is in all things, above all things, around all things, beneath all things. He is present with the whole of his being in every atom of the universe, and yet he is infinitely extending beyond his creation.

I recall the pastor of my youth frequently praying after a sermon, “Lord, we have tried to say a few things about thee. But we have only mumbled and stuttered a bit, for thou art far, far greater than our understanding of thee.”

Though we shall grow in the knowledge of God into all eternity, we shall never reach an end of our search for the riches of God’s blessed being. Everlasting life is not long enough to exhaust the riches of the knowledge of God. Though we know what the Scriptures say of God, our knowledge of God is less than a thimbleful of water in comparison with all the oceans and seas on the earth.

Yet, we know him—know him as our Friend, our Redeemer, our covenant God! What a wonder, for he shows us enough of himself for us to live in warm covenant fellowship with him.

Let us exalt his holy name.

Herman Hanko

Read: 1 Kings 8:22–30

In an earlier article, we touched briefly on God's invisibility. The key text for this attribute of God is 1 Timothy 1:17: "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

God's invisibility follows from his other attributes. Because God is unique in his being, he is also invisible. He is like no other creature. There is no being like his being. He is "the wholly other one." He is in a class by himself. He cannot be compared with anything. And so, he is also invisible.

We cannot see him; the angels cannot see him; the saints in heaven cannot see him. His greatness is of such a kind that no one can see him. The only way he can be seen is by his revelation of himself. He speaks about himself. He speaks about who he is, what he is like, what great works he does. And he speaks of himself in a way that we can understand him.

Calvin spoke of God's revelation as "baby-talk,"* for he is so much greater than we are that he has to come down to us and adapt his speech to our feeble and imperfect understanding.

It is common today and characteristic of the shallow and superficial religion so many people have that even ministers speak of God and to God as if they were chatting over the backyard fence with a neighbor of equal importance with themselves. They open worship services with, "Good morning, God" (or worse, "Hello, Daddy"). They throw mud on God's great majesty.

The believer is over and over again deeply impressed with God's greatness. He comes to God with fear, trembling, humility, awe, wonder, and a deep sense of God's greatness.

God reveals himself in Scripture and speaks of himself in such a simple way that we can understand what he says. But Scripture is the record of all that God does through Jesus Christ. When we read the Scriptures, we meet Jesus Christ. We come to know him as our Savior and Lord. And when we know him, we know God.

So it will be in heaven. Though God is invisible, we shall see him; but we shall see him in the face of Jesus Christ, for our Savior is both God and man in one divine person. "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Herman Hanko

* John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beveridge trans. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1.13.1.

Read: Hebrews 6:11–20

The confession that we are discussing tells us that Scripture teaches the immutability of God. That is, one of God's incommunicable attributes is his unchangeableness. The classic text in the Bible to prove this is Malachi 3:6: "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."

It is important that we confess this attribute of God, for many in our day deny it. These false teachers teach that God is changeable, and that, in fact, his attitude towards people in the world changes, because he reacts to their faith or unbelief. This blasphemy of God arises out of Arminianism, an error that teaches that the final decision on the question of salvation rests with man's will. God reacts with happiness and approval or with anger depending on what man's choice is.

God is unchangeable in his own being. All his attributes also are unchangeable. It is not true that although God is just, his mercy and love override his justice and cancel it out.

Because God is unchangeable in his own divine being and attributes, he is unchangeable in his counsel. This is clearly taught in Isaiah 46:9–10: "Remember the former things of old: for 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."

Because God is unchangeable in his counsel, he is unchangeable in his works of grace and love which he shows to us. Because our Lord Jesus Christ is divine as well as human, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Heb. 13:8). He is unchangeable also in his promises which he has made to establish his covenant with us and our children. And because God is unchangeable, and his promise is unchangeable, we "have a strong consolation, who have fled [to Christ] for refuge" (Heb. 6:18).

What a comfort this is, for we are fickle and changeable. Today, we pray earnestly; tomorrow, we do not pray at all. Today, we confess our sins. Tomorrow, we return to them. Sometimes we are fervent, and sometimes we are cold as ice. Sometimes our love is strong, and sometimes it turns weak and hardly noticeable. But our God in Jesus Christ is the unchangeable one in all his promises to us.

Herman Hanko

Read: Isaiah 44

God's infinity is very closely related to his other incommunicable attributes. Infinity is best understood in contrast to our finiteness.

We are, in all respects, finite. We are finite because we are creatures and completely dependent on God for everything.

To be finite means to be limited. We are limited to this creation and cannot be in heaven as well as on earth. We are limited in being in only one place at a time; we cannot be both in Singapore and in the States at the same time, nor even in Jurong and in Woodlands. We are bound by time. It takes twenty to twenty-four hours to travel by plane from Grand Rapids to Singapore. We can do only so much work within a given time, and we often say, "I ran out of time."

We are more than ever limited with the entrance of sin into the world. We are limited in what we can do because our strength is limited. We are limited in what we can see, because our eyes cannot see very far and cannot penetrate objects in the way. We are limited by sickness and disease. We are limited by old age, and our limitations become very great when we are past eighty years old.

But God is not limited in any way. He is not limited by space, for he is, with the whole of his essence, present in every particle of the creation, but he is still infinitely extended beyond the entire universe. His being knows no boundaries. He is not limited by time, for he is without beginning and without end. He is the Eternal One. His counsel is eternal. In his counsel and plan, Cain eternally killed Abel. In his changeless purpose, Christ eternally died and rose again. All history is eternal and without limitation before the mind of God.

We cannot even begin to imagine God's infinity. If we could imagine what God's infinity is, then it would not be infinity anymore, for it would be limited by the limitations of our minds.

There are truths concerning God that we must not even try to understand, for in doing so with our finite minds, we destroy the infinite. We can only bow in worship and adoration before such a great God as we have. And our adoration turns to praise and thanksgiving when we believe that this God is our God.

Herman Hanko

Read: Job 38

When we pray the Lord's prayer, we conclude the prayer with the words, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" (Matt. 6:13). We confess that God possesses "the power." That means that all power belongs to God. There can be no power anywhere, except it be the power of God.

God's power belongs to his infinity. If God's power is infinite, so that all power is his, then God is also the only God. It is impossible that there be two powers, both infinite, both possessing all power. Therefore, God is almighty: all-mighty.

What a great God we have!

God showed his power in the work of creation. He spoke, and it came to pass. All things were formed by the word of his mouth. His power is manifested not only in the creation of this universe, but also in the creation of heaven.

God's power is everywhere present in the world every moment, for he continues to give each creature its existence. He not only created an oak tree by the word of his power, but he continues to speak that word, and that is the only reason the oak tree continues to exist.

God's absolute sovereignty is the exercise of his power, and he is sovereign over all, including wicked men and devils. The devils had to ask Christ's permission to go from the man who was devil-possessed into the pigs (Mark 5:11–13). God is sovereign, although he exercises his sovereignty over the wicked in such a way that they remain responsible for their sins.

God is almighty in his work of salvation. Our Canons of Dordt say that God's power is revealed in the work of salvation just as much as in the work of creation (Canons 3–4.12). It takes a mighty power of God to make a depraved and blaspheming sinner a praying saint. It takes a power greater than anything man possesses to change a totally depraved enemy of God to a glorious child of God. It takes a great power of God in Jesus Christ to perform the work of atonement, resurrection, and ascension, by which we are saved.

God can do all things. He can do all things for you and me. He can and will do all that is necessary to make us his people.

Praise be to God!

Herman Hanko

Read: 1 Timothy 1:17, Proverbs 8

The Belgic Confession speaks of God's wisdom as the first communicable attribute. Historically, the attributes of God have been divided between his incommunicable attributes and his communicable attributes. The former are attributes that belong to God alone; the latter are attributes that are found in man created after the image of God.

But the Confession speaks of God as being "all-wise." The meaning is that all wisdom is God's wisdom, and all wisdom possessed by man is God's wisdom.

Wisdom, if we would define it, is God's determination to seek the best possible goal for all his works, and the best possible way to attain that goal. The best possible goal for God to seek is the glory of his own name. And the best possible way to attain that goal is to reveal himself through Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus Christ is called, in 1 Corinthians 1:24, "the Wisdom of God."

In Medieval times, Roman Catholic scholastics would argue about very strange and wrong things. They would argue about how many angels can dance on the point of a pin. They would debate whether the fact that God is almighty means that God could create two mountains without a valley in-between. They would debate whether God's wisdom means that there are an infinite number of ways in which God could have realized his own glory. Foolish questions.

The answer to all these questions is simply that God's wisdom is revealed in the highest and best possible way, and that is the way of salvation in God's own eternal Son. None of God's attributes can be exercised in such a way that their exercise is contrary to his own infinitely perfect being.

God's wisdom is an attribute of God's counsel. Therefore, as that counsel is worked out in the history of God's creation, all that happens in history is wise, the wise works of God, best suited to manifest God's great glory.

Only God's people have wisdom. The wicked are fools, and all that they do is foolish. But God gives his people wisdom so that they may be wise as they walk in the world. They are able to choose the best possible goal for their lives—the glory of God. And by the wisdom God gives, they are able to choose the best possible way to attain that goal: obedience to God.

And "if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God" (James 1:5).

Herman Hanko