

THE BELGIC CONFESSION OF FAITH



The (right-minded) orthodox Christian confession of the Dutch churches that includes the main content of the doctrine of God and the eternal salvation of souls.

At a time of great persecution of Protestant Churches, this Confession was drafted by Guido de Bres. It was in the year 1561 in the Southern Netherlands (now Belgium). Several Synods in the 16th century as well as the National Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) accepted it as one of the Confessions of the Reformed Churches.

ARTICLE 1: THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD

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

ARTICLE 2: HOW GOD MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN TO 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 beautiful book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many letters leading us to perceive clearly God's invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are sufficient to convict men and leave them without excuse.

Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word as far as is necessary for us in this life, to His glory and our salvation.

ARTICLE 3: THE WORD OF GOD

We confess that this Word of God did not come by the impulse of man, but that men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, as the apostle Peter says (2 Pet 1:21).

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, 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 of this 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 (Gal 1:8). Since it is forbidden to add to or take away anything from the Word of God (Deut 12:32), 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 only a breath (Ps 62:9).

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 from God (1 Jn 4:1). Likewise: If any one comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him (2 Jn 1:10).

ARTICLE 8: GOD IS ONE ESSENCE, YET DISTINGUISHED IN THREE PERSONS

According to this truth and this Word of God, we believe in one only God, who is one single essence, in which are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties; namely, the Father, 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, the wisdom, and the image of the Father.

The Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might who proceeds 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, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each has His personal existence, distinguished by Their properties; but in such a way that these three persons are but one only God.

It is therefore 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 our flesh and blood, neither has the Holy Spirit, but the Son only. The Father has never been without His Son, or without His Holy Spirit. For these three, in one and the same essence, are equal in eternity. There is neither first nor last; for They are all three one, in truth, in power, in goodness, and in mercy.

ARTICLE 9: SCRIPTURE PROOF OF THIS DOCTRINE

All this we know both from the testimonies of Holy Scripture and from the respective works of the three Persons, and especially those we perceive in ourselves. The testimonies of Scripture which lead us to believe this Holy Trinity are written in many places of the Old Testament. It is not necessary to mention them all; it is sufficient to select some with discretion.

In the book of Genesis God says: Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness ... So God created man in His own image...; male and female He created them (Gen 1:26, 27). Also: The man has now become like one of Us (Gen 3:22). From God's saying, Let Us make man in Our image, it appears that there are more divine persons than one; and when He says, God created, He indicates that there is one God. It is true, He does not say how many persons there are, but what seems to be somewhat obscure in the Old Testament is very plain in the New Testament. For when our Lord was baptized in the river Jordan, the voice of the Father was heard, who said, This is My Son, whom I love (Mt 3:17); the Son was seen in the water, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form as a dove. For the baptism of all believers Christ commanded: Baptize all nations into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). In the gospel according to Luke the angel Gabriel thus addressed Mary, the mother of our Lord: The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35). Likewise: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Cor 13:14). In all these places we are fully taught that there are three persons in one only divine essence.

Although this doctrine far surpasses all human understanding, nevertheless in this life we believe it on the ground of the Word of God, and we expect to enjoy its perfect knowledge and fruit hereafter in heaven.

Moreover, we must observe the distinct offices and works of these three Persons towards us. 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. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been maintained and preserved in the true church since the time of the apostles to this very day, over against Jews, Muslims, and against false Christians and heretics such as Marcion, Mani, Praxeas, Sabellius, Paul of Samosata, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. In this doctrine, therefore, we willingly receive the three creeds, of the Apostles, of Nicea, and of Athanasius; likewise that which in accordance with them is agreed upon by the early fathers.

ARTICLE 10: JESUS CHRIST 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 of the same essence with the Father, equally-eternal, the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being (Heb 1:3), and is equal to 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 the following testimonies, when compared with each other, teach us: Moses says that God created the world; the apostle John says that all things were made by the Word which he calls God. The letter to the Hebrews says that God made the world through His Son; likewise the apostle Paul says that God created all things through Jesus Christ. Therefore it must necessarily 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 He could

say, I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am (Jn 8:58), and He prayed, Father, glorify Me in Your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began (Jn 17:5). And so He is true, eternal God, the Almighty, whom we invoke, worship, and serve.

ARTICLE 11: THE HOLY SPIRIT TRUE AND ETERNAL GOD

He is neither made, created, nor begotten, but He can only be said to proceed from both. In order He is the third Person of the Holy Trinity, of one and the same essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God, as the Holy Scriptures teach us.

ARTICLE 12: THE CREATION OF ALL THINGS, ESPECIALLY THE ANGELS

We believe that the Father through the Word, that is, through His Son, has created out of nothing heaven and earth and all creatures, when it seemed good to Him, and that He has given to every creature its being, shape, and form, and to each its specific task and function to serve its Creator. We believe that He also continues to sustain and govern them according to His eternal providence and by His infinite power in order to serve man, 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 these have fallen from the exalted position in which God created them into everlasting perdition, but 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 of all that is good.

With all their might, they lie in wait like murderers to ruin the church and all its members and to destroy everything by their wicked devices.

They are therefore by their own wickedness sentenced to eternal damnation and daily expect their horrible torments.

Therefore we detest and reject the error of the Sadducees, who deny that there are any spirits and angels; and also the error of the Manichees, who say that the devils were not created, but have their origin of themselves, and that without having become corrupted, they are wicked by their own nature.

ARTICLE 13: THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

We believe that this good God, after He had created all things, did not abandon them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that according to His holy will He so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without His direction.

Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed nor can He be charged with them.

For His power and goodness are so great and beyond understanding that He ordains and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even when devils and wicked men act unjustly.

And as to His actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which He teaches us in His Word, without transgressing these limits.

This doctrine gives us inexpressible consolation, for we learn thereby that nothing can happen to us by chance, but only by the direction of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures so under His power that not one hair of our head – for they are all numbered – nor one sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father (Mt 10:29, 30).

In this we trust, because we know that He holds in check the devil and all our enemies so that they cannot hurt us without His permission and will.

We therefore reject the damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God does not concern Himself with anything but leaves all things to chance.

ARTICLE 14: THE CREATION AND FALL OF MAN AND HIS INCAPACITY OF DOING WHAT IS TRULY GOOD

We believe that God created man of dust from the ground and He made and formed him after His own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy. His will could conform to the will of God in every respect. But, when man was in this high position, but when he was in honor he did not understand it and did not recognize his excellence.

He gave ear to the words of the devil and willfully subjected himself to sin and consequently to death and the curse.

For he transgressed the commandment of life which he had received; by his sin he broke away from God, who was his true life; he corrupted his whole nature. By all this he made himself guilty and subject to physical and spiritual death.

Since man became wicked and perverse, corrupt in all his ways, he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had once received from God. He has nothing left but some small traces, which are sufficient to make man inexcusable. For whatever light is in us has changed into darkness, as Scripture teaches us, The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it (Jn 1:5); where the apostle John calls mankind darkness.

Therefore we reject all teaching contrary to this concerning the free will of man, since man is a slave to sin and a man can receive only what is given him from heaven. For who dares to boast that he of himself can do any good, when Christ says: No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him?

Who will glory in his own will, when he understands that the sinful mind is hostile to God?

Who can speak of his knowledge, since natural man does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God?

In short, who dares to claim anything, when he realizes that we are not competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God?

Therefore what the apostle says must justly remain sure and firm: It is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.

For there is no understanding nor will conformable to the understanding and will of God unless Christ has brought it about; as He teaches us: Apart from Me you can do nothing.

ARTICLE 15: THE ORIGINAL SIN

We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has spread throughout the whole human race. It is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother's womb. As a root it produces in man all sorts of sin. It is, therefore, so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn the human race.

It is not altogether abolished or wholly eradicated even by baptism, for sin continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source.

Yet, in spite of all this, original sin is not imputed to the children of God to their condemnation but by His grace and mercy is forgiven them.

This does not mean that the believers may sleep peacefully in their sin, but that the awareness of this corruption may make them often groan as they eagerly wait to be delivered from this body of death.

In this regard we reject the error of the Pelagians, who say that this sin is only a matter of imitation.

ARTICLE 16: DIVINE ELECTION

We believe that, when the entire offspring of Adam plunged into perdition and ruin by the transgression of the first man, God manifested Himself to be as He is: merciful and just. Merciful, in rescuing and saving from this perdition those whom in His eternal and unchangeable counsel He has elected in Jesus Christ our Lord by His pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. Just, in leaving the others in the fall and perdition into which they have plunged themselves.

ARTICLE 17: THE RESCUE OF FALLEN MAN

We believe that, when He saw that man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in His marvelous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him.

He comforted him with the promise that He would give him His Son, born of woman, to crush the head of the serpent and to make man blessed.

ARTICLE 18: THE INCARNATION OF THE SON OF GOD

We confess, therefore, that God has fulfilled the promise He made to the fathers by the mouth of His holy prophets when, at the time appointed by Him, He sent into the world His own only-begotten and eternal Son, who took the form of a servant and was born in the likeness of men. He truly assumed a real human nature with all its infirmities, without sin, for He was conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit and not by the act of a man.

He not only assumed human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, in order that He might be a real man. For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary that He should assume both to save both.

Contrary to the heresy of the Anabaptists, who deny that Christ assumed human flesh of His mother, we therefore confess that Christ partook of the flesh and blood of the children. He is a descendant of David; born of David according to His human nature; of the womb of the virgin Mary; born of woman; a branch of David; a shoot from the stump of Jesse; descended from Judah; descended from the Jews according to the flesh; of the seed of Abraham, since the Son was concerned with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore He had to be made like His brothers in every respect, yet without sin.

In this way He is in truth our Immanuel, that is, God with us.

ARTICLE 19: THE TWO NATURES IN THE ONE PERSON OF CHRIST

We believe that by this conception the person of the Son of God is inseparably united and joined with the human nature, so that there are not two sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person. Each nature retains its own distinct properties: His divine nature has always remained uncreated, without beginning of days or end of life (Heb 7:3), filling heaven and earth. His human nature has not lost its properties; it has beginning of days and remains created. It is finite and retains all the properties of a true body.

Even though, by His resurrection, He has given immortality to His human nature, He has not changed its reality, since our salvation and resurrection also depend on the reality of His body.

However, these two natures are so closely united in one person that they were not even separated by His death.

Therefore, what He, when dying, committed into the hands of His Father was a real human spirit that departed from His body.

Meanwhile His divinity always remained united with His human nature, even when He was lying in the grave.

And the divine nature always remained in Him just as it was in Him when He was a little child, even though it did not manifest itself as such for a little while.

For this reason we profess Him to be true God and true man: true God in order to conquer death by His power; and true man that He might die for us according to the infirmity of His flesh.

ARTICLE 20: THE JUSTICE AND MERCY OF GOD IN CHRIST

We believe that God, who is perfectly merciful and just, sent His Son to assume that nature in which disobedience had been committed, to make satisfaction in that same nature; 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 iniquity on Him, and poured out His goodness and mercy on us, who were guilty and worthy of damnation. Out of a most perfect love He gave His Son to die for us and He raised Him for our justification that through Him we might obtain immortality and life eternal.

ARTICLE 21: THE SATISFACTION OF CHRIST OUR HIGH PRIEST

We believe that Jesus Christ was confirmed by an oath to be a High Priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek. He presented Himself in our place before His Father, appeasing God's wrath by His full satisfaction, offering Himself on the tree of the cross, where He poured out His precious blood to purge away our sins, as the prophets had foretold.

For it is written, The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. He was numbered with the transgressors, and condemned as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, though he had first declared Him innocent.

He paid back what He did not steal. He suffered as the righteous for the unrighteous. He suffered in body and soul, feeling the horrible punishment caused by our sins, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. Finally, He exclaimed, My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? All this He endured for the forgiveness of our sins.

Therefore we justly say, with Paul, that we know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. We consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. We find comfort in His wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means of reconciliation with God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which the believers are perfected for all times.

This is also the reason why the angel of God called Him Jesus, that is, Saviour, because He [would] save His people from their sins.

ARTICLE 22: OUR JUSTIFICATION THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST

We believe that, in order that we may obtain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith.

This faith embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, makes Him our own, and does not seek anything besides Him. For it must necessarily follow, either that all we need for our salvation is not in Jesus Christ or, if it is all in Him, that one who has Jesus Christ through faith, has complete salvation.

It is, therefore, a terrible blasphemy to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something else is needed besides Him; for the conclusion would then be that Christ is only half a Saviour. Therefore we rightly say with Paul that we are justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Meanwhile, strictly speaking, we do not mean that faith as such justifies us, for faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ our righteousness; He imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works as He has done for us and in our place. Therefore Jesus Christ is our righteousness, and faith is the

instrument that keeps us with Him in the communion of all His benefits. When those benefits have become ours, they are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.

ARTICLE 23: OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD

We believe that our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake and that therein our righteousness before God consists, as David and Paul teach us. They speak of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. The apostle also says that we are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Therefore we always hold to this firm foundation. We give all the glory to God, humble ourselves before Him, and acknowledge ourselves to be what we are. We do not claim anything for ourselves or our merits, but rely and rest on the only obedience of Jesus Christ crucified; His obedience is ours when we believe in Him.

This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities and to give us confidence in drawing near to God, freeing our conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without doing what our first father, Adam, did, who trembling tried to hide and covered himself with fig leaves.

For indeed, if we had to appear before God, relying – be it ever so little – on ourselves or some other creature, (woe be to us!) we would be consumed.

Therefore everyone must say with David, O Lord, do not bring Your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before You.

ARTICLE 24 OUR SANCTIFICATION AND GOOD WORKS

We believe that this true faith, worked in man by the hearing of God's Word and by the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man. It makes him live a new life and frees him from the slavery of sin.

Therefore it is not true that this justifying faith makes man indifferent to living a good and holy life. On the contrary, without it no one would ever do anything out of love for God, but only out of self-love or fear of being condemned. It is therefore impossible for this holy faith to be inactive in man, for we do not speak of an empty faith but of what Scripture calls faith expressing itself through love. This faith induces man to apply himself to those works which God has commanded in His Word. These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, since they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless, they do not count toward our justification. For through faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do any good works. Otherwise they could not be good any more than the fruit of a tree can be good unless the tree itself is good.

Therefore we do good works, but not for merit. For what could we merit? We are indebted to God, rather than He to us, for the good works we do, since it is He who works in us, to will and to act according to His good purpose (Phil 2:13). Let us keep in mind what is written: So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty (Luke 17:10)." Meanwhile we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is by His grace that He crowns His gifts.

Furthermore, although we do good works, we do not base our salvation on them. We cannot do a single work that is not defiled by our flesh and does not deserve punishment. Even if we could show one good work, the remembrance of one sin is enough to make God reject it. We would then always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be constantly tormented, if they did not rely on the merit of the death and passion of our Saviour.

ARTICLE 25: CHRIST, THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW

We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all foreshadowings have come to an end, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled.

In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken from the law and the prophets, both to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honesty, according to God's will and to His glory.

ARTICLE 26: THE INTERCESSION OF CHRIST.

We believe that we have no access to God except through the one and only Mediator and Intercessor: Jesus Christ the Righteous.

He therefore was made man, uniting together the divine and human natures, so that we human beings might have access to the divine Majesty.

Otherwise we would have no access.

But this Mediator, whom the Father has appointed between himself and us, ought not terrify us by his greatness, so that we have to look for another one, according to our fancy.

For neither in heaven nor among the creatures on earth is there anyone who loves us more than Jesus Christ does.

Although he was "in the form of God," he nevertheless "emptied himself," taking the form of "a man" and "a servant" for us; and he made himself "completely like his brothers." Suppose we had to find another intercessor. Who would love us more than he who gave his life for us, even though "we were his enemies"? And suppose we had to find one who has prestige and power.

Who has as much of these as he who is seated "at the right hand of the Father,"⁶⁷ and who has all power "in heaven and on earth"?⁶⁸ And who will be heard more readily than God's own dearly beloved Son? So then, sheer unbelief has led to the practice of dishonoring the saints, instead of honoring them.

That was something the saints never did nor asked for, but which in keeping with their duty, as appears from their writings, they consistently refused.

We should not plead here that we are unworthy— for it is not a question of offering our prayers on the basis of our own dignity but only on the basis of the excellence and dignity of Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is ours by faith.

Since the apostle for good reason wants us to get rid of this foolish fear— or rather, this unbelief— he says to us that Jesus Christ was "made like his brothers in all things," that he might be a high priest who is merciful and faithful to purify the sins of the people.

For since he suffered, being tempted, he is also able to help those who are tempted.

And further, to encourage us more to approach him he says, "Since we have a high priest, Jesus the Son of God, who has entered into heaven, we maintain our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to have compassion for our weaknesses, but one who was tempted in all things, just as we are, except for sin.

Let us go then with confidence to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace, in order to be helped." The same apostle says that we "have liberty to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus.

Let us go, then, in the assurance of faith...." Likewise, "Christ's priesthood is forever.

By this he is able to save completely those who draw near to God through him who always lives to intercede for them." What more do we need? For Christ himself declares: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to my Father but by me." Why should we seek another intercessor? Since it has pleased God

to give us his Son as our Intercessor, let us not leave him for another— or rather seek, without ever finding.

For when God gave him to us he knew well that we were sinners.

Therefore, in following the command of Christ we call on the heavenly Father through Christ, our only Mediator, as we are taught by the Lord's Prayer, being assured that we shall obtain all we ask of the Father in his name.

ARTICLE 27: THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH.

We believe and confess One single catholic or universal church— a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end, as appears from the fact that Christ is eternal King who cannot be without subjects.

And this holy church is preserved by God against the rage of the whole world, even though for a time it may appear very small in the eyes of men— as though it were snuffed out.

For example, during the very dangerous time of Ahab the Lord preserved for himself seven thousand men who did not bend their knees to Baal.

And so this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain persons.

But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.

ARTICLE 28: THE OBLIGATIONS OF CHURCH MEMBERS.

We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it, no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition.

But all people are obliged to join and unite with it, keeping the unity of the church by submitting to its instruction and discipline, by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and by serving to build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body.

And to preserve this unity more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to God's Word, to separate themselves from those who do not belong to the church, in order to join this assembly wherever God has established it, even if civil authorities and royal decrees forbid and death and physical punishment result.

And so, all who withdraw from the church or do not join it act contrary to God's ordinance.

ARTICLE 29: THE MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH.

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully, by the Word of God, what is the true church— for all sects in the world today claim for themselves the name of "the church." We are not speaking here of the company of hypocrites who are mixed among the good in the church and who nonetheless are not part of it, even though they are physically there.

But we are speaking of distinguishing the body and fellowship of the true church from all sects that call themselves "the church." The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults.

In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head.

By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church— and no one ought to be separated from it.

As for those who are of the church, we can recognize them by the distinguishing marks of Christians: namely by faith, and by their fleeing from sin and pursuing righteousness, once they have received the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ.

They love the true God and their neighbors, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works.

Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.

As for the false church, it assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God; it does not want to subject itself to the yoke of Christ; it does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in his Word; it rather adds to them or subtracts from them as it pleases; it bases itself on men, more than on Jesus Christ; it persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke it for its faults, greed, and idolatry.

These two churches are easy to recognize and thus to distinguish from each other.

ARTICLE 30: THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH.

We believe that this true church ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments. There should also be elders and deacons, along with the pastors, to make up the council of the church.

By this means true religion is preserved; true doctrine is able to take its course; and evil men are corrected spiritually and held in check, so that also the poor and all the afflicted may be helped and comforted according to their need.

By this means everything will be done well and in good order in the church, when such men are elected who are faithful and are chosen according to the rule that Paul gave to Timothy.⁷⁶

ARTICLE 31: THE OFFICERS OF THE CHURCH.

We believe that ministers of the Word of God, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by a legitimate election of the church, with prayer in the name of the Lord, and in good order, as the Word of God teaches.

So everyone must be careful not to push himself forward improperly, but he must wait for God's call, so that he may be assured of his calling and be certain and sure that he is chosen by the Lord.

As for the ministers of the Word, they all have the same power and authority, no matter where they may be, since they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal bishop, and the only head of the church.

Moreover, to keep God's holy order from being violated or despised, we say that everyone ought, as much as possible, to hold the ministers of the Word and elders of the church in special esteem, because of the work they do, and be at peace with them, without grumbling, quarreling, or fighting.

ARTICLE 32: THE ORDER AND DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH.

We also believe that although it is useful and good for those who govern the churches to establish and set up a certain order among themselves for maintaining the body of the church, they ought always to guard against deviating from what Christ, our only Master, has ordained for us.

Therefore we reject all human innovations and all laws imposed on us, in our worship of God, which bind and force our consciences in any way.

So we accept only what is proper to maintain harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.

To that end excommunication, with all it involves, according to the Word of God, is required.

ARTICLE 33: THE SACRAMENTS.

We believe that our good God, mindful of our crudeness and weakness, has ordained sacraments for us to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us, and also to nourish and sustain our faith.

He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what he enables us to understand by his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts, confirming in us the salvation he imparts to us.

For they are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So they are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us, for their truth is Jesus Christ, without whom they would be nothing.

Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments that Christ our Master has ordained for us.

There are only two: the sacrament of baptism and the Holy Supper of Jesus Christ.

ARTICLE 34: THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM.

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, in whom the law is fulfilled, has by his shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood, which anyone might do or wish to do in order to atone or satisfy for sins.

Having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, he established in its place the sacrament of baptism. By it we are received into God's church and set apart from all other people and alien religions, that we may be dedicated entirely to him, bearing his mark and sign. It also witnesses to us that he will be our God forever, since he is our gracious Father.

Therefore he has commanded that all those who belong to him be baptized with pure water "in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." In this way he signifies to us that just as water washes away the dirt of the body when it is poured on us and also is seen on the body of the baptized when it is sprinkled on him, so too the blood of Christ does the same thing internally, in the soul, by the Holy Spirit.

It washes and cleanses it from its sins and transforms us from being the children of wrath into the children of God.

This does not happen by the physical 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, who is the devil, and to enter the spiritual land of Canaan.

So ministers, as far as their work is concerned, give us the sacrament and what is visible, but our Lord gives what the sacrament signifies— namely the invisible gifts and graces; washing, purifying, and cleansing our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving us true assurance of his fatherly goodness; clothing us with the "new man" and stripping off the "old," with all its works. For this reason we believe that anyone who aspires to reach eternal life ought to be baptized only once without ever repeating it— for we cannot be born twice.

Yet this baptism is profitable not only when the water is on us and when we receive it but throughout our entire lives.

For that reason we detest the error of the Anabaptists who are not content with a single baptism once received and also condemn the baptism of the children of believers.

We believe our children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as little children were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises made to our children.

And truly, Christ has shed his blood no less for washing the little children of believers than he did for adults.

Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them, just as the Lord commanded in the law that by offering a lamb for them the sacrament of the suffering and death of Christ would be granted them shortly after their birth. This was the sacrament of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, baptism does for our children what circumcision did for the Jewish people.

That is why Paul calls baptism the “circumcision of Christ.”⁷⁹

ARTICLE 35: THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD’S SUPPER.

We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the sacrament of the Holy Supper to nourish and sustain those who are already born again and ingrafted into his family: his church.

Now those who are born again have two lives in them.

The one is physical and temporal— they have it from the moment of their first birth, and it is common to all.

The other is spiritual and heavenly, and is given them in their second birth; it comes through the Word of the gospel in the communion of the body of Christ; and this life is common to God’s elect only.

Thus, to support the physical and earthly life God has prescribed for us an appropriate earthly and material bread, which is as common to all as life itself also is.

But to maintain the spiritual and heavenly life that belongs to believers he has sent a living bread that came down from heaven: namely Jesus Christ, who nourishes and maintains the spiritual life of believers when eaten— that is, when appropriated and received spiritually by faith.

To represent to us this spiritual and heavenly bread Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of his body and wine as the sacrament of his blood.

He did this to testify to us that just as truly as we take and hold the sacraments in our hands and eat and drink it in our mouths, by which our life is then sustained, so truly we receive into our souls, for our spiritual life, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior.

We receive these by faith, which is the hand and mouth of our souls.

Now it is certain that Jesus Christ did not prescribe his sacraments for us in vain, since he works in us all he represents by these holy signs, although the manner in which he does it goes beyond our understanding and is incomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God’s Spirit is hidden and incomprehensible.

Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ’s own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood— but the manner in which we eat it is not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith.

In that way Jesus Christ remains always seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven— but he never refrains on that account to communicate himself to us through faith.

This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ communicates himself to us with all his benefits.

At that table he makes us enjoy himself as much as the merits of his suffering and death, as he nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of his flesh, and relieves and renews them by the drinking of his blood.

Moreover, though the sacraments and the thing signified are joined together, not all receive both of them.

The wicked person certainly takes the sacrament, to his condemnation, but does not receive the truth of the sacrament, just as Judas and Simon the Sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament, but not Christ, who was signified by it. He is communicated only to believers.

Finally, with humility and reverence we receive the holy sacrament in the gathering of God's people, as we engage together, with thanksgiving, in a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior, and as we thus confess our faith and Christian religion.

Therefore no one should come to this table without examining himself carefully, lest "by eating this bread and drinking this cup he eat and drink to his own judgment." In short, by the use of this holy sacrament we are moved to a fervent love of God and our neighbors.

Therefore we reject as desecrations of the sacraments all the muddled ideas and damnable inventions that men have added and mixed in with them.

And we say that we should be content with the procedure that Christ and the apostles have taught us and speak of these things as they have spoken of them.

ARTICLE 36: THE CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

We believe that because of the depravity of the human race our good God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.

He wants the world to be governed by laws and policies so that human lawlessness may be restrained and that everything may be conducted in good order among human beings.

For that purpose he has placed the sword in the hands of the government, to punish evil people and protect the good.

And being called in this manner to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God, the civil rulers have the task, subject to God's law, of removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship.

They should do this while completely refraining from every tendency toward exercising absolute authority, and while functioning in the sphere entrusted to them, with the means belonging to them.

They should do it in order that the Word of God may have free course; the kingdom of Jesus Christ may make progress; and every anti-Christian power may be resisted.* Moreover everyone, regardless of status, condition, or rank, must be subject to the government, and pay taxes, and hold its representatives in honor and respect, and obey them in all things that are not in conflict with God's Word, praying for them that the Lord may be willing to lead them in all their ways and that we may live a peaceful and quiet life in all piety and decency.

And on this matter we denounce the Anabaptists, other anarchists, and in general all those who want to reject the authorities and civil officers and to subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods and corrupting the moral order that God has established among human beings.

* The preceding three paragraphs are a substitution for the original paragraph below, which various Reformed Synods have judged to be unbiblical: "And the government's task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ;

and to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honored and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word.”

ARTICLE 37: THE LAST JUDGMENT.

Finally, we believe, according to God’s Word, that when the time appointed by the Lord is come (which is unknown to all creatures) and the number of the elect is complete, our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, bodily and visibly, as he ascended, with great glory and majesty, to declare himself the judge of the living and the dead.

He will burn this old world, in fire and flame, in order to cleanse it.

Then all human creatures will appear in person before that great judge— men, women, and children, who have lived from the beginning until the end of the world.

They will be summoned there by the voice of the archangel and by the sound of the divine trumpet.

For all those who died before that time will be raised from the earth, their spirits being joined and united with their own bodies in which they lived.

And as for those who are still alive, they will not die like the others but will be changed “in the twinkling of an eye” from “corruptible to incorruptible.” Then “the books” (that is, the consciences) will be opened, and the dead will be judged according to the things they did in the world, whether good or evil.

Indeed, all people will give account of all the idle words they have spoken,⁸⁴ which the world regards as only playing games.

And then the secrets and hypocrisies of men will be publicly uncovered in the sight of all.

Therefore, with good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to wicked and evil people.

But it is very pleasant and a great comfort to the righteous and elect, since their total redemption will then be accomplished.

They will then receive the fruits of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered; their innocence will be openly recognized by all; and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring on the evil ones who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.

The evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal—but only to be tormented in the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

In contrast, the faithful and elect will be crowned with glory and honor.

The Son of God will “confess their names”⁸⁶ before God his Father and the holy and elect angels; all tears will be “wiped from their eyes”; and their cause— at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil officers— will be acknowledged as the “cause of the Son of God.” And as a gracious reward the Lord will make them possess a glory such as the heart of man could never imagine.

So we look forward to that great day with longing in order to enjoy fully the promises of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.