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B. The Netherland or Belgic Confession (Confessio Belgica)

The original title was in French. Title: "Confession de Foy, faiste d'un commun accord pour les fideles qui conversent es Pays-Bas, lesquels desirent vivre selon la purete ' de l' Evangele de nostre Seigneur Jesus Christ". Translation: "Confession of faith made with one accord for the faithful that are wondering in the low countries, (the Netherlands) according to the purity of the Gospel, who desired to live of Jesus Christ."

The Confessio Belgica was composed in the year 1561. This places the composition of this part of the three forms of unity in a period of great trouble and fierce persecution and suffering for Christ's sake. Especially in the low countries including what is today Belgium (17 provinces in Netherlands and Belgium). This persecution was instituted by the Roman Catholic Spaniards and the chief instigator was the sovereign Phillip II, son of Charles V. His instruments were the members of the Spanish Inquisition who had their agents everywhere to discover heretics, and when they found them, subjected them to the most cruel tortures and finally a most cruel death. Somewhat later, the chief leader in these cruel persecutions was the well known Duke of Alva. It is estimated by some that no fewer than 100,000 at this time suffered martyrdom in the cause of Christ.

The author of the Confessio Belgica was Guido de Bres. He was born at Mons, in 1523. He was brought up in the Catholic faith, but converted to the Protestant faith by a diligent reading of the Scriptures. He was banished from his country and became a refugee in London where he prepared himself for the ministry. As soon as circumstances permitted, he returned to the continent and became an itinerant preacher; a faithful witness of Christ especially in Belgium and Northern France.

But, the enemy left him no rest. His period of labor was very limited, for soon he was put in bonds in the prison of Valenciennes, and on May 31, 1567 he was hanged. It was he who prepared the Confessio Belgica in the year 1561, with the aid of Adrian de Saravia, Professor in Lijden; H. Moditus, and G. Wengen.

Its original composition was in the French language. It was revised by Francis Junious of Bourges. It is not impossible that it was first printed in 1562, but it is certain that there appeared a printed edition in 1566, and afterwards translated into German, Dutch, and Latin. After having been approved and adopted by several Synods, it was finally revised and adopted together with the H. Catechism by the National Synod of Dordrecht, in 1619, and since then was recognized by the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, Africa, and America as part of their confession.

This confession consists of thirty seven (37) articles. In distinction from the H. Catechism, which follows the practical subjective order, i.e. the knowledge of misery, salvation, and gratitude, this confession follows the dogmatic order like the Gallic Confession. After an introductory article, expression belief in the one God, and a second that is concerned with revelation, the confession devotes articles 3-7 to the setting forth of the Reformed faith concerning the Scriptures. Articles 8-11 treat of the doctrine of God, the Trinity,

the divinity of Christ, and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Then follow articles 12-15, speaking of creation, man, and the fall. After two articles on eternal election, and the recovery of fallen man (16 and 17) which appear here rather in infra-lapsarian style, the confession treats the doctrine of Christ, His incarnation, His two natures, in the unity of the person, His work and satisfaction as our High-priest, up to article 22. In articles 22-24, the confession treats of the doctrine of salvation, to which are appended articles 25 and 26, which speak of the abolishing of the ceremonial law and Christ's intercession respectively. In articles 27-35 the confession speaks of the Church and of the sacraments. Article 26 treats of the magistrates, and the last article treats of the doctrine of the last things.

Without entering into details, we may remark the following about this confession in particular:

1. The Confessio Belgica begins with an article about God. This means that it proceeds from the theological standpoint. This is characteristic of the Reformed faith. Lutheranism always was rather anthropological and soteriological. It is concerned about the question "How is man saved?", but for the Reformed faith the doctrine of God is all important. It is theological, rather than anthropological, the glory of God, not the salvation of man, is the purpose of all things. This is undoubtedly the correct view point. Our conception of God is determinative for our whole life-view and religion.

As to the contents of this article, we may briefly notice that it speaks of God's being and attributes. Of the former it affirms God's oneness, God's simplicity, and God's spirituality. And of the latter it mentions the so called incommunicable attributes: eternity, incomprehensibility, invisibility, immutability, and infinity, and the communicable attributes: power, wisdom, justice and goodness. It closes with the beautiful statement that He is the overflowing fountain of all good.

2. In articles 2-7, the confession treats of the means whereby God may be known by us, in the following order:

- a. Article two mentions these means. They are two-fold, namely first of all creation and providence by which the universe is "before our eyes as a most elegant book wherein all creatures, great and small are so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God". Secondly, the Holy Scriptures or His Divine Word, in which He makes Himself more fully and more clearly known, in as far as it is necessary for us to know Him in this life. Here we may notice that the confession implies the clearness or perspicuity and necessity of the Holy Scriptures.

- b. Article three speaks of the divine origin of the Word of God ascribing it to infalible inspiration, and this is the reason why "we call such writings Holy and Divine Scriptures."

- c. Article four enumerates the canonical books "against which nothing can be alleged." It gives these books in the order in which they occur in our Bible. We may note here that the epistle to the Hebrews is ascribed to the apostle Paul, a statement, to say the least, which may be questioned.

- d. Article five speaks of the authority of the Holy Scriptures and the reason why we received them as authoritative. As to the former it states: "We receive all these books, and these only as holy and can-

nonical for the regulation, foundation and confirmation of our faith." And as to the reason why they are received as such, the article states the following: "Not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Ghost witnesses in our hearts that they are from God whereof they carry the evidence in themselves." The authority of the Holy Scriptures therefore; is grounded objectively in their self-testimony, and subjectively of the Testimonium Spiritus Sancti in our hearts.

e. Article 6 speaks of the difference between the canonical and apocryphal books. It mentions the apocryphal books and it evaluates them as follows: "All of which the church may read and take instruction from, so far as they agree with the canonical books: but they are far from having such power and efficacy, as that we may from their testimony confirm any point of faith, or of the christian religion; much less detract from the authority of the other sacred books."

f. Article 7 deals with the absolute sufficiency of Holy Writ. The doctrine where of "is most perfect and complete in all respects." Nothing (the word of man, traditions, decrees of councils) can be put on a par with it or may be considered equal to it. We may conclude therefore; that all the different attributes of Holy Scripture, that is, the authority, the necessity, the perspicuity and the sufficiency, are directly or indirectly mentioned in these articles.

3. In the articles that speak of the doctrine of God, the confession deals:

a. With the Trinity. It emphasizes that God is a single essence, but that in that single essence there are nevertheless three persons. "Really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties". Note here the peculiar use of incommunicable attributes referring, not to their essential properties, but in their personal distinctions.

b. In article 9 the confession speaks of the proof of the doctrine of the Trinity which it finds chiefly in Scripture to which it also refers, but also by the operations of the three persons in the out-going works. Chief among the latter, according to the confession, are those operations which we feel in ourselves. What is meant by this, is explained later in the article as follows: "Moreover; we must observe the particular offices and operations of these three persons towards us. The Father is called our creator by His power. The Son our Saviour and Redeemer, by His blood. The Holy Ghost is our sanctifier by His dwelling in our hearts."

c. Article 10 confesses the divinity of Christ in the following words: "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 should be a creature, but co-essential and co-eternal with the Father, the express image of His person and the brightness of His glory, equal unto Him in all things." The rest of the article sets forth on what Scriptural basis this article rests.

d. Finally, in Article 11, the divinity of the Holy Spirit is confessed, as being "The same essence, majesty, and glory with the Son, and also His procession from both the Father and the Son."

4. The following articles speak of creation and man including the doctrine of sin:

a. In article 12, we find the confession concerning the truth

of creation, and in this article we find the well-known and beautiful expression that God upholds all creatures and governs them by His eternal providence and power: "For the service of mankind to the end that man may serve his God."

b. In article 13, we have more particularly the confession of God's providence. It is this article to which the synod of 1924 referred as proof of their contention that there is an operation of the Holy Spirit restraining/ in the unregenerated. We may note however; that the providence of God is considered from the view-point of saving grace and the Christian. Him the doctrine affords unspeakable consolation, for he knows that God keeps all the powers of darkness under His power, so that they can do nothing against His people. That there is no reference here to any operation of the Holy Spirit is plain from the fact that this work of God's power includes especially the work of devils.

c. Article 14 speaks of man's creation and at the same time of his fall. We may note here that it is this article that is often quoted in proof of the contention that there is a remnant of the image of God in man. The contention however; is wrong and the proof is not here. The distinction between the image of God in the wider and narrower sense finds no support in this article. It speaks of the image of God in the following words: God formed man: "After His own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will, agreeably to the will of God." The article then goes on to speak of the fall of man by which: "He corrupted his whole nature." And according to the confession, man by sin lost all his excellent gifts in addition to the fact that he became wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways. It is in these last terms that the confession refers to the corruption of God's image in man. The "excellent gifts" of which the confession speaks, refers to what the canones call natural light. (III, IV, 4.) and it is of these excellent gifts of which he has a few remnants, not of the image of God.

d. We may also note that in article 15, which speaks of original sin, it considers this truth from the organic and spiritual ethical view-point, rather than from the juridical. It does not speak of original guilt as the juridical ground for original corruption, nor does it speak of Adam's relation as representative head of the human race, as the reason for the imputation of the first sin to all. But it merely states that: "Through the disobedience of Adam original sin is extended to all mankind." And it describes this original sin as: "A corruption of the whole nature and an hereditary disease wherewith infants are infected even in their mother's womb, and which produces all sort of sin, being in him as a root thereof."

5. The articles on Christ are introduced by an article on election, and an article on the recovery of fallen man which are followed in articles 18-21 by statements concerning the person, natures, and work of Christ. Let us note the following:

a. That article 16 speaks of election in its historical realization. It tells us, namely, that God manifested Himself after the fall, as merciful and just. Merciful in saving the elect, just in leaving others in their perdition. This, of course, is the historical view-point. This also may account for the fact that the article is infralapsarian. It conceives of reprobation as a leaving of some in their perdition.

b. Article 17 really serves as an introduction to the rest of the article on Christ. It speaks of the promise, referring especially to Genesis 3:15.

c. That article 18 emphasizes especially the reality of the human nature of Christ. The article confesses on opposition to the Anabaptists, that "Christ is become a partaker of the flesh and blood of the children." And it traces the descent of Christ through David and Jesse and Judah to Abraham.

d. Article 19, which speaks of the union of the two natures of Christ, emphasizes two truths:

1. By the union of the two natures, each nature remained unchanged. 2. That the union of the two natures is such, that in the one person, they are inseparable. This is true, the article says, even in death. "But in the mean time the Divine nature always remained united with the human, even when He lay in the grave."

e. That in article 20, the work of Christ is considered from the viewpoint of the justice and mercy of God, for God's justice was revealed by God's punishing Christ for our sin, while His mercy was manifested in His giving His only begotten Son in our behalf.

f. In article 21, which speaks of the death of Christ as the satisfaction of God's justice, the abundant reference to Scripture is striking. Beautifully put is also the following: "Therefore; He restored that which He took not away, and suffered the just for the unjust as well in His body as in His soul, feeling the terrible punishment which our sins had merited." The article also emphasizes the absolute sufficiency of the cross for our salvation.

6. Articles 21-26 treat of the doctrine of salvation.

a. In article 22, the subject is that of saving faith. The article makes no distinction between faith as a power and faith as a conscious act, but very concretely speaks of the living, active faith: "Which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him and seeks nothing more besides Him." It emphasizes the sufficiency of Christ for our salvation. It calls it gross blasphemy "For any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides Him." And therefore; it emphasizes the sufficiency of faith unto our justification. And finally; it stresses the truth that we are not justified because of faith as another work, but that Christ is the ground of our justification.

b. The same truths are emphasized in article 23 which speaks of justification. It teaches: "That our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied." It emphasizes that outside of Christ we have nothing on which to rely for our righteousness, while on the other hand, the righteousness of Christ is quite "Sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God, fleeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig leaves."

c. Article 24 speaks of sanctification and good works. In this article we read the somewhat remarkable expression that faith "Doth regenerate and make him a new man." Here regeneration is evidently used in the widest sense of sanctification. For in any other sense regeneration certainly precedes faith. The article emphasizes that faith cannot be unfruitful "Therefore; it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man for we do not speak of vain faith, but of such a faith which is called in Scripture a faith that worketh by love,

which excites man to the practice of those works which He has commanded in His Word." It also emphasizes the undeserving character of our good works. We do not oblige God to us, by doing good works, but on the contrary, "We are beholden to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He that worketh in us to will and to do of His good pleasure." It, however, confesses that our good works are rewarded, but the reward is of grace, and even our best works are always polluted with sin.

d. Here the Netherland Confession inserts an article somewhat unexpectedly, perhaps, on the ceremonial law, concerning which it teaches that it is indeed abolished because it is fulfilled in Christ, while their substance we have in Christ. On the other hand, this article expresses that the ceremonial law is still useful: "To confirm us in the doctrine of the Gospel, and to regulate our life in all honesty".

e. This section closes with an article on Christ's intercession (article 26). In this article it is strongly emphasized that we approach God through Christ only, and that He alone is quite sufficient as a Mediator, through Whom we have access to God. And therefore; the mediocrity of saints is condemned. "Therefore; it was only through distrust that this practice of dishonoring instead of honoring the saints was introduced."

7. Articles 27-32 speak of the Catholic Christian Church as follows:

a. Article 27 describes that church as:

- (1) General or universal.
- (2) Existing throughout the ages, from the beginning to the end of the world. This, according to the article, is evident from the fact that Christ is an eternal King that cannot be without subject.

b. Article 28 speaks of our obligation to join ourselves to the true church. It asserts:

- (1) That without the church there is no salvation. Hence, we may not live in separation from the church.
- (2) That we are in duty bound to maintain the unity of the church, to serve the edification of the members of the church.
- (3) That therefore; it is our duty to separate ourselves from unbelievers, and to join ourselves to the true congregation of believers, eventhough the powers of the world should oppose and persecute us because of this.

c. Article 29 speaks of the distinction between the true church and the false, and, in connection with this, of the distinguishing marks of the former.

- (1) The true church must be distinguished:
 - (a) Not from the hypocrites that are always mixed with believers.
 - (b) But from all other groups that pretend to be the church and are not. Hence, from all sects and false churches.
- (2) As to the marks that distinguish the true church, the article mentions the pure preaching of the Word of God, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline.
- (3) Besides, it speaks of the marks of the true believers,

under which it mentions several items that are comprehended in sanctification -- a sanctified walk, ~~inseparation~~ ^{inseparation} from the world. It warns however; that this does not mean that the believers are not characterized by many imperfections and infirmities, for which, however; they are heartily sorry and repent, and against which they fight, always finding forgiveness in the blood of Christ.

(4) It finally speaks of the false church which is characterized by trusting in inventions and the institutions of men, rather than in the Word of God, and by persecuting the Godly instead of excommunicating the ungodly.

d. Article 30 speaks of the government of the church, by the ministers, elders, and deacons. We may note here especially, that it mentions the deacons as belonging to the church council i.e. the consistory. It does this in distinction from the church order, according to which only the ministers and elders constitute the government of the church.

e. Article 31 speaks of the offices in particular. Here we may note the following:

(1) It emphasizes that the office bearers ought to be legally elected by the church. No one must therefore; intrude himself into the holy offices.

(2) It describes the ministerial office as having a general significance to ~~the~~ ^{the} church. It is not confined to the local congregation,

(3) It also emphasizes that the members ought to esteem the officebearers highly for their work's sake.

f. Article 32 treats of church order and discipline.

(1) It states that it is indeed necessary to establish certain rules for the good order of the church which emphasizes immediately that in establishing these we must not depart from the institutions of Christ.

(2) All human inventions are to be rejected. Only that may be established which tends to the concord and unity of the church.

(3) For this discipline, ~~which~~, according to the article, essentially excommunication is required.

g. Articles 33-35 treat of the sacraments.

(1) Article 33 speaks of the sacraments. We may note the following elements:

a. It tells us first of all that the sacraments were ordained on account of our weakness and infirmities.

b. That they are visible signs and seals and means of grace, which, however; are not vain and insignificant since Christ is the true object presented by them. This is stated overagainst Rome.

c. It finally emphasizes also against The Roman conception of the sacraments that there are not many, but two sacraments ordained by the Lord.

(2) In article 34, the subject of Holy Baptism is treated. It emphasizes the following points:

a. That it is instituted instead of circumcision.

b. That it is an ensign or banner separating us unto God

from all other people and strange religions.

c. It signifies cleansing from sin, and regeneration, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

d. That the ministers administer the visible sign, but that only the Lord can give that which is obnoxious.

e. That it cannot be repeated. This overagainst Anabaptists.

f. That it ought to be administered to infants, because it rests upon the same promises as circumcision because Christ shed His blood for them, no less than for the adult, and because it has the same significance as circumcision.

(3) Article 35 treats of the Lord's Supper. It points out:

a. That the elect have a two-fold life; the corporal and earthly life which is common to all men, and the Spiritual and heavenly life which is peculiar to the elect. So the Lord provides for them a two-fold nourishment: earthly bread and heavenly bread. That latter is Christ, and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are signs of this heavenly bread through which the Holy Spirit nourishes us with true Spiritual food.

b. That we eat and drink Christ at the Lord's table, not by our mouths, but by faith. This is plainly asserted in opposition to the Roman Catholic conception and that of Lutheranism, for both these conceptions inseparably connect the grace of Spiritual nourishment with the sign so that by partaking of the sign, one necessarily partakes of the thing obnoxious.

c. In close connection with the preceding, the article emphasizes that the ungodly receive not the truth of the sacrament even though they receive the sign.

d. Finally, it emphasizes that self-examination is necessary unto a proper spiritual celebration of the Lord's Supper in true faith and love of one another.

h. Article 36 speaks of the civil magistrates. It speaks of:

(1) The institution of government as it now functions. It is instituted because of the depravity of man to restrain his dissoluteness and to maintain good order and decency among men. It therefore; bears the sword for the punishment of evil doers, and for the protection of them that do good. It is a well known fact that the Christian Reformed Church appealed to this article in support of the theory that through an influence of the Holy Spirit, and of grace, men do good. The foolishness of this appeal lies on the surface. The synod evidently did not see the difference between the Holy Spirit and a policeman, and therefore; not between an outward restraint and inward improvement.

(2) The office of the civil magistrate is described as consisting in having regard for the welfare of the civil state. But also in defending the truth of the Gospel and destroying all false worship. Against this latter statement an objection was raised and sustained by the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, which also was adopted by the Christian Reformed Churches in our country in 1910. The principle of the objection is, that, article 36 here proceeds from the assumption of the established church and would lead to the practice of acknowledging and protecting that church, only forbidding and destroying all other churches and worship. Instead the objection sustains the view of the separation of church and state. (See for this the note in your Psalter in connection with this article).

We may remark that although there is room for a correction of this article, the last word has not yet been said about this question.

(3) It emphasizes the duty of everyone to be in subjection to the civil magistrates.

(4) And finally it rejects the views of, and the practices of Anabaptists and other sidicious people. In connection with which the synod of 1924 was kind enough to quot in application to us.

i. Article 37 speaks of that last things. It is remarkable that the Confession denotes only one article to the doctrine of the last things. In our day, perhaps, this part of the truth would occupy a somewhat more prominent place. Yet it must be added that the essential elements of this doctrine are mentioned in this article and that it certainly is one of the most beautiful articles of the confession which is undoubtedly also due to the fact that it was formulated in a period of persecution and oppression, and suffering for Christ's sake. We find it in the following elements:

- (1) It emphasizes the corporal and visible return of Christ.
- (2) It confesses that all men shall appear in judgment which is to take place after the resurrection of the dead and thereafter living.
- (3) All men are to be judged according to their works. These works are to be manifested, for the books will be opened, and, according to the confession, the books are the consciences of men.
- (4) It speaks of the reward and punishment. The judgment will be terrible for the wicked who shall be punished with everlasting fire, but the knowledge of it is a great comfort for the just, for they shall receive glory and honor, and their cause which is now so often condemned by the powers of this world, shall then be known as the cause of the Son of God. The article closes with the prayer: "Even so, Come, Lord Jesus!"