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The Belgic Confession

Historical background, contextual meaning, contemporary relevance

Edited by

Albert J Coetsee, Sarel P van der Walt & D Francois Muller

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EDITORS

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Research justification

The Belgic Confession (1561) is one of the oldest Reformed confessions and is adopted by many churches in the Reformed tradition around the world. Not much, however, has recently been published on the Belgic Confession as a whole – especially regarding its contemporary relevance. This publication aims to fill this gap.

The publication groups the 37 articles of the Belgic Confession together in order to cover the whole of the confession in 12 chapters (alongside an introductory chapter). The emphasis of the publication is on two aspects: (1) providing a scope of contemporary theological, ethical and general issues and possible controversies regarding the content of the Belgic Confession; and (2) formulating ethical perspectives and guidelines from the Belgic Confession that may assist in the building of societies. Where applicable, chapters also discuss the history of the text of the Belgic Confession, the organic unity between the articles of the Belgic Confession, a dogma-historical perspective on the development of the doctrine and content of the Belgic Confession and the relationship between the Belgic Confession and other confessions. The emphasis throughout, however, falls on investigating the contemporary relevance of the Belgic Confession.

The various chapters of this volume are written by scholars who are experts in their fields. As such, this volume represents scholarly discourse for scholars. All chapters are original investigations with original results and were cleared of possible plagiarism by using iThenticate. No part of this work has been plagiarised. The findings of this investigation should be beneficial for today's Reformed community around the world. The target audience is specialists in the field of dogma-history and systematic theology.

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Abbreviations and acronyms, figures and tables appearing in the text and notes

List of abbreviations and acronyms

Aros	Akademie Reformatoriese Opleiding en Studies
CanRC	Canadian and American Reformed Churches
CCAP	Church of Central Africa Presbyterian
CD	Canons of Dort
CERC	Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church
CGK	Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken [Christian Reformed Churches]
CHE	Christian Higher Education
CO	Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia [All surviving works of John Calvin]
CPRC	Covenant Protestant Reformed Church
CRC	Christian Reformed Church
CRC-N	Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria
CRCNA	Christian Reformed Church in North America
DEIC	Dutch East India Company
FERC	First Evangelical Reformed Church
GKN-Synodalen	Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland [Reformed Churches in the Netherlands]
GK-Vrijgemaakt	Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland Vrijgemaakt [Reformed Churches in the Netherlands Liberated]
GKSA	Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika [Reformed Churches in South Africa]
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
NGB	Nederlandse Geloofsbelydenis [Belgic Confession]
NGK	Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken [Dutch Reformed Churches]
NHK	Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk [Dutch Reformed Church]
NHKA	Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika [Dutch Reformed Church of Africa]

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NWU	North-West University
PC	Presbyterian Church
PKN	Protestantse Kerk in Nederland [Protestant Church in the Netherlands]
PRCA	Protestant Reformed Churches in America
PU	Potchefstroom University
QA	Question and answer
RCA	Reformed Church in America
RCEA	Reformed Church of East Africa
RCSA	Reformed Churches in South Africa
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SHC	Second Helvetic Confession
TEKAN	Tarayyar Ekklisiyar Kristi a Nigeria [United Church of Christ in Nigeria]
UFS	University of the Free State
URCSA	Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa
URCNA	United Reformed Churches in North America
USA	United States of America
UWC	University of the Western Cape
VGKSA	Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika [United Reformed Church in South Africa]
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WWII	World War II

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Introduction: The texts and contexts of the Belgic Confession, then and now

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■ In a package that 'fell from the sky'

During the evenings of 01 and 02 November 1561, a package containing a defensive plea [Dutch: *verweerschrift*] and an accompanying anonymous letter landed within the walls of the Castle of Doornik (Tournai). However, such a document never simply 'falls from the sky'. The author, Guido de Brès, threw it over the wall within specific circumstances and with specific intent.

This chapter intends to provide the relevant background to this document, which eventually became known as the Belgic Confession and which millions of Christians all over the world have used – and still use – to express their faith.

The heading of this chapter has intentionally been formulated in a wide and even vague way. It could also have been formulated as 'the contexts of the Belgic Confession', as there are indeed several contexts that need to be taken into account for its sound understanding and application. On the one

hand, there are the contexts within which it originated, especially the religious and political contexts. Half a century later, when the Belgic Confession had been accepted by the Synod of Dort (or Dordrecht) as one of what were later to be called the three forms of unity, the political context had shifted substantially. Since then, the broader societal context has shifted even more. While the Belgic Confession originated in the premodern era, and while it has been accepted by several groups during the modern era, we are currently in the postmodern era – in which there are still a number of groups who use this confession to express their faith.

There have also been some changes made to the text of the confession. Some of these changes have been made during its natural development until its acceptance at the Synod of Dort on 31 May 1619. Since then, however, there have not only been several divisions (especially since 1834 and 1886) and mergers (1869, 1892 and as recent as 2014) within the Reformed family of churches, but different churches have also extended or migrated to different geopolitical locations. This also motivated, and even necessitated (e.g. Art. 36), different changes by different groups in different new locations. All of this means that one needs to be somewhat careful today when speaking of 'the' Belgic Confession, as if there is only one standard version of the text. That being said, the changes do not represent fundamental changes of faith at all but rather changes in the way that the tenets are being expressed.

This chapter will therefore focus on the different religious and sociopolitical contexts pertaining to the Belgic Confession – including a focus on the Anabaptists and on De Brès as its primary author. It will furthermore focus on the text and its development through the centuries and also pay attention to its structure. Finally, some concluding remarks will be made while taking into account that this chapter is the introduction to this book. This final section will therefore highlight some of the matters that have changed and some that have remained unchanged between then and now in order to indicate why the Belgic Confession is still relevant and very useful nearly more than 450 years after it was written.

■ The context within which the Belgic Confession was born

■ The sociopolitical context

Within less than ten years of the appearance of Luther's 95 Theses, the 1526 Diet of Speyer effectively accepted the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (De Jong 1987, pp. 167, 207). This was a very significant political development, of which the effects are felt even today. The geographical area (covered by the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation) now

started to be subdivided into churches [*Landeskirche*] that were partly determined by the 'country' or area that they formed part of (Berkhof & De Jong 1967, p. 153). This furthered a process that had been started in the late Middle Ages. Even prior to the beginning of the Middle Ages, however, it was strongly believed that unity within the church benefitted the state (e.g. the emperor's role of calling together the Councils of Nicaea [325 AD] and Constantinople [381 AD]). Yet it was only after the 1555 Diet of Augsburg that the Reformation could be legally established as the only legal religion in areas where the feudal governor was evangelical.

One of the legacies of the Middle Ages was that the 'land church' [*Landeskirche*] was governed by a landlord. Sovereign governors or rulers now became increasingly independent of both the (Roman Catholic) church and the emperor, who had been seen as the worldly or civil head of the *corpus christianum* since the Carolingian era. The freedom that was gained in 1526 (and formalised at the Diet of Augsburg, 1555) was, if seen from the current understanding of religious freedom, only limited. On the one hand, it was only the governor of an area (and not the population in general) who had the freedom to choose whether they wanted the people over whom they had authority to be either Roman Catholic or Lutheran (and only if they accepted the 1530 Augsburg Confession). On the other hand, those were still the only two legal options. The current situation in several countries in the world, where most citizens have a legal right to decide what religion they want to follow, was not even on the horizon yet. The right to freedom of conscience was also just a fledgling idea.

The 16th century, therefore, did not only see the birth of Protestantism and its religious influence, but it was also during this era that nationalism started to gain real momentum (Latourette 1953, p. 690; Van der Zwaag 1999, p. 28). The *corpus christianum*,[1] which had dominated Europe for about 1,000 years, started to fall apart, dividing evermore into national states. (The significance of such a change could be compared to what could happen if the national states that we know today were to be replaced sometime in the future by international conglomerates dominating society.) The ideology of the church of God – the communion of believers – was systematically replaced by the up-and-coming ideology of the national state. Unlike their predecessors, national states were not feudal in nature but would rather depend on 'modern' government officialdom. The change meant that the (feudal) *person* in control, who acted freely within their realm, was gradually being pushed to the background and was replaced by

1. The term *corpus christianum* does not refer to a political entity as such but is used to typify the more central, western and even southern parts of Europe in religious and cultural terms. While Christianity was a dominant presence in these areas, this term does not imply that all its inhabitants were Christians. Also take note that, politically speaking, Europe itself was at no stage a single country, state or legal unity – not even in the times of the Roman or Carolingian Empires.

a government official, often an anonymous person just 'doing their job' without necessarily having any personal stake in the matter of responsibility towards whoever appointed them.

Apart from the fact that the state had triumphed in its struggle with the church for control over society, the state (and society in general) increasingly came to be seen in humanistic terms. The state came to be seen as a product of human intervention rather than divine providence. The late Middle Ages were still dominated by Aquinas's idea that the church was the owner of the *lex aeterna* and the supernatural means of grace. For the sake of the theocratic ideal, which both the church and the government strove towards, it was necessary for the church to bring the state (which belonged to the secular realm) to its real, actual destination.

In this sense, a double change was at play. Where the church was still attempting to hold its own against the state in the struggle over who should be seen as the primary representative of God on this earth (with the accompanying authority), the state was not only victorious in this battle but also viewed itself increasingly less as a servant of God while exercising authority over society. This development would only reach maturity with the Enlightenment. Even so, Van der Zwaag indicates that in spite of the fact that the state had taken control over several areas of life, the basic societal structures were still mostly guided by religious aims during the Reformation. Governments still took responsibility for the religious well-being [*cura religionis*] of their subjects and had the right to protect this well-being – whether this was Roman Catholic or Protestant. This deeply embedded care, however, now led to conflict. Since both Protestants and Roman Catholics viewed themselves as the only representatives of true Christianity, both groups claimed governmental protection – not only against dissident individuals or splinter groups but also from each other. Keep in mind that during the Reformation, (formalised) religion was still so central to society that heretics were regarded as political opponents. 'Religious' offences, like blasphemy, were often treated as criminal matters deserving a criminal's punishment, even the death sentence. All of this meant that where the government previously only had to protect *the* church, it now had to ask *which* church and delve into religious content. In this light, it is not surprising that the 16th and 17th centuries were the eras within which devastating religious wars were fought in Europe. The legacy of these divisions and conflicts was spread throughout several parts of the rest of the world and is still felt today. An example of this can be seen in the United States of America's (USA's) 'wall of separation between church and state' and the resulting, widely accepted private–public distinction concerning religion.

■ The 'Low Countries' ('nether lands')

At the start of the Reformation, the term 'Low Countries' ('nether lands') was mostly a geographical rather than a political term. The population of this area was divided, according to language and culture, between the Dutch in the north, the Flemish in the central area and the French-speaking Walloons in the south. Emperor Charles V was initially only the Duke of Holland. After becoming the ruler of the 'nether lands', he wanted to unify the whole area according to the example of other emerging national states. In order to achieve this unity, he instituted a number of new dioceses to help to instil discipline (Latourette 1953, p. 763). In the German areas he ruled, his hands were tied by the Lutheran Reformation. Since he wanted to avoid this happening in the 'nether lands' as well, he issued some of the strictest placards against anyone showing any consent with the Reformation. Printing, reading or possessing heretical literature (especially Lutheran) was punishable by confiscation of property and, from 1550, by death (Kooiman 1968, p. 245). Neglecting to report such a person to the authorities was also punishable by death (Kurtz 1904, p. 234). While as many as 10,000 people might have died in this way, the strategy was not successful. It is not without reason that Tertullian remarked that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Kurtz (1904, p. 234) indicates that the Anabaptists (see following discussion), for instance, drew thousands of supporters, which in turn sanctioned Charles's disgust at the Reformation.

In the meantime, many Calvinists left the north of France, seeking refuge in the 'nether lands'. The fact that they were politically active and were able to organise well meant that several members of the nobility were also drawn into a struggle which increasingly became a struggle against both the emperor and the pope. Witte (2007, p. 144) points to the example of the Calvinist who wanted to serve God according to his laws and who was accused of both heresy and treason. It was probably this very connection between their faith and political views that drove the people of the 'nether lands' to their death-defying willingness to suffer for their cause.

Philip II, for whom De Brès's 1561 Doornik letter was meant, succeeded his father, Charles V, when he abdicated in 1555. Measured by Roman Catholic standards, Philip II was pious and dedicated. He performed his religious duties as a monk and emperor in a faithful way. Berkhof (1955, p. 211) thinks that while he was just as 'fanatical' as his father, he lacked his father's insight and ability. Hofmeyr and Van Niekerk (1989, p. 2) describe him as a suspicious person who, in many ways, did not understand his times. With him as leader, the Counter-Reformation reached a climax. He undertook to protect the Roman Catholic faith – even if many of his subjects had to die in the process.

In order to realise his father's dream for the 'nether lands', Philip II divided large areas of land between the newly created diocese. After leaving the area in 1559 for the last time, he left his half-sister, Margaret of Parma, in charge as regent of the area. In 1565, members of the lower nobility formed a 'Pact or covenant of Nobles' [*Eedverbond der Edelen*]. The following year, they asked Margaret to end the inquisition and abolish the placards. While Margaret responded with vague promises, the population saw this as a turning point, which triggered a series of events that would bring ruin to cities like Valenciennes – where De Brès had incidentally been ministering at that time. This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In the meantime, the Calvinists started to meet for the so-called *hagenpreken* – worship services where the Word was preached in the open air rather than within church buildings. Most of these buildings were, in any case, still set up to facilitate Roman Catholic liturgies. Even when a placard of July 1566 prohibited these open-air worship services, the masses of people who turned up did not stop, but they started to attend while armed with weapons. According to Kooiman (1968, p. 246), these *hagenpreken* certainly contributed to the iconoclastic fury [*beeldenstorm* or *Bildersturm*] that broke out in the 'nether lands' in 1566 (and spread to several other areas). The success of the destruction brought about by the iconoclastic fury was short-lived. It also brought division between the Calvinists and the Lutherans, who did not want to associate themselves with 'church robbers'.

The iconoclastic fury had a severe effect on Philip II (Kurtz 1904, p. 245). One can only think what emotional effect such destruction, at times nearly barbaric, must have had on a culturally refined person. In 1567, Philip II replaced Margaret with Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, third Duke of Alba, who suppressed the Dutch severely with his well-trained troops. When he left the 'nether lands' after five years, he boasted that he had sent 18,000 Dutch to their deaths for the sake of their faith.

The 80 Years' War, which broke out in 1568 and which led to both the loss of Belgium for the Reformation and the eventual political independence of the Netherlands, was interrupted by a ceasefire which started in 1609 and provided sufficient opportunity for the Synod of Dort to be held from November 1618 to May 1619. Although the independence of the Netherlands was only formally recognised in 1648 within the Peace Accord of Westphalia, by the time the synod was held, the battle was mostly won.

The implication of this, however, is that while De Brès formulated the confession at a time when the Reformed faith and its supporters were increasingly oppressed, it was accepted by the Synod of Dort at a time when Calvinists were politically in control. While De Brès wrote his confession amidst the heat of the struggle (partly against foreign political control) and in nearly underground circumstances, it was finally and

formally accepted as a confession when circumstances were calm enough to have a synod in public, openly attended by international delegates, all with the approval of the government.

The religious context(s) of the Belgic Confession

As has been indicated above, the acceptance of the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* brought a measure of religious freedom to (apart from, of course, the Roman Catholics) those Lutherans who accepted the Augsburg Confession. On the one hand, the freedom to choose between these two options was given to the ruler. The ruler's subjects had little option but to accept the choice their ruler made. On the other hand, legally, there were only these two options – even after it was formally accepted in 1555. At that time, Reformed Christians (like the followers of Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin) and the Anabaptists were not even granted freedom of conscience. According to Hartvelt (1991, p. 4), the process of dividing Europe into religious sectors was only completed by 1580.

As far as the 'nether lands' were concerned, the ideas of Zwingli and the Anabaptists found fertile ground in spite of Charles V's opposition. This can be explained in light of the fact that the Modern Devotion and the Brethren of the Common Life (cf. Thomas à Kempis and Wessel Gansfort) had had significant influence in the area since the 14th century. After reading Gansfort later, Luther exclaimed that if he had read Gansfort earlier in his life, people would have had a right to think that he got his ideas from Gansfort (Kooiman 1968, p. 243). Kurtz (1904, p. 237) indicated that by the 16th century, the Dutch already had a well-founded reading culture. This explains why Luther's ideas were so well known from a relatively early stage. Printed versions of the New Testament were, furthermore, also available in the 'nether lands' since 1522 and from 1527 to the public in general. Add to this the fun that Erasmus of Rotterdam poked at the pope and aspects of the Roman Catholic Church, and it is clear why the 'nether lands' were ripe for the Reformation within a few years after Luther's pioneering work[2] set everything in motion.

Anabaptism and its followers

It is generally agreed that the content of the confession that became the Belgic Confession cannot be understood without a sound understanding of the Anabaptists. Hofmeyr and Van Niekerk (1989, p. 2), who made a

2. Van Wyk (2019, p. 61) argues that Luther's 'hammering his famous 95 Theses to the church's door' should in fact not be regarded as the catalyst of the Reformation and that it was rather the theological disputations that he initiated that made the difference. The invitation to one of these disputations did, however, contain a copy of the now-famous *95 Theses*.

thorough study of its text, go as far as to say that Anabaptist actions and beliefs are the most significant matter which needs to be understood if one wants to understand the Belgic Confession. According to Jonker (1994, p. 50), it is precisely the Belgic Confession's anti-Anabaptist traits that distinguished it from other Reformed confessions. The French Confession [*Confessio Gallicana*] of 1559 – which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter – provides a meaningful comparison at this point. It is clear that the Belgic Confession largely follows the French Confession – which, according to Cairns (1996, p. 309), can be seen as a sound summary of Calvin's theology. It is furthermore known that Calvin tried to dissuade De Brès from continuing to formulate what became the Belgic Confession after Adrian Saravia (Hadrian à Saravia) showed Calvin a copy of De Brès's initial work. De Brès followed Calvin's advice at first. Several authors agree that he eventually went forward with the publication of the confession that he wrote primarily because he believed that the French Confession did not denounce Anabaptist views sufficiently.[3] De Brès, however, mentioned the Anabaptists by name in Article 34. (Note that the express reference to the Anabaptists in Art. 36 is not applicable here, as this was only added later [cf. Vonk 1956, p. 646, who provided De Brès's original version].)

■ To whom does the term Anabaptist refer?

While there are a number of misunderstood issues connected to the Belgic Confession, the issue of who the Anabaptists were is certainly one of them.

In this section, a broad overview will therefore be given of the basic Anabaptist beliefs and the prevalence of these groups. It is, however, necessary to keep in mind that while the term Anabaptist is often used as if it refers to a rather homogenous group of people, these people were not a united nor organised group at all (cf. Muller 2010, p. 26). The Anabaptists, rather, were people who, to a different extent, were part of a broader movement that started to sweep across Europe since the beginning of the 16th century. The term, therefore, more accurately refers to various groups of people who lived at various locations at somewhat different times and who had only some key beliefs and practices in common. One of the reasons for this is that many people who became Anabaptists did this, at first, in reaction. Most reacted to somewhat different things that went awry at different places and times, in different ways, and to a different extent. These people's ability and options to react to all of this also differed. In this way, they can be compared to the Reformers. While the Reformers enjoyed

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3. Doekes (1975, p. 55) notes that another reason could have been that after the most recent Habsburg–Valois War, the authorities in Brussels would have been suspicious of any ideas that might have been seen to be from France.

more unity in their beliefs and were often more organised, they were confronted with a similar varied situation and also had varied success in their attempts at Reformation. The varied nature of the Anabaptists also helps to explain the blanket, unsophisticated approach that authorities had towards them.

This varied nature of the Anabaptists' beliefs and actions is important in more ways than one for the sound interpretation of the Belgic Confession. As will be indicated later in this chapter, De Brès, after a specific set of events, used the confession during 1561 in his attempt to protect the Reformed congregation of Doornik (Tournai) against Margaret's commissioners, who viewed its members as (rebellious) Anabaptists. Authors like Doekes (1975, p. 56) point out that De Brès, however, stated in his accompanying letter that it was written for the sake of more than 100,000 Reformed Christians across the 'nether lands' and that his defensive plea [*verweerschrift*], including the confession, was also meant to be to their benefit. This is, to my mind, why a confession formulated for the sake of a specific congregation was accepted by many others in a relatively short period of time. While most of these Reformed Christians also had to deal with Anabaptists and accusations that they were Anabaptist themselves, they inevitably encountered a variety of Anabaptists and understood and implemented the confession accordingly. This helps to explain some of the changes (cf. Art. 36) that were made over time to the Belgic Confession.

◼ The birth of the Anabaptist movement

While it may be impossible to identify the exact event that should be regarded as the birth of Anabaptism, certain events in Zürich can be taken as the birth of this movement. In 1523, a group of citizens of Zürich felt that Zwingli had failed as a reformer. While Zwingli wanted to change the city gradually, these citizens wanted to abolish the mass and images there and then. The city's authorities supported the Reformation but were not prepared to implement these radical changes at that stage – partly for political reasons. Members of this group were persecuted, expelled and even executed (cf. Walker et al. 1997, p. 450 for details of these events).

While keeping in mind that not all Anabaptists shared the same views and also not to the same extent or with the same nuance, the most significant Anabaptist viewpoints can, however, be summarised as follows (cf. De Jong 1980, p. 179):

• The firm conviction that the content of their beliefs came to them via the immediate or direct (i.e. without any instruments) inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. especially the prophets of Zwickau).

- The practice of searching for biblical norms for issues of social justice – but often in a very Biblicist way. (There was therefore also little, or rather, just about no room for creeds or confessions of faith. Van Wyk [2022, p. 131], who discusses the views of Philip Melanchthon, highlights the fact that the Anabaptists held a general anti-intellectual disposition and rejected science as such. Because of this, they also did not link up with any established theological tradition.)
- The firm and sometimes overwhelming belief that radical change on Earth was imminent and that this would be brought about by the earthly reign of Jesus Christ (cf. especially Thomas Müntzer, Hans Hut and Melchior Hoffman).
- Nearly all Anabaptists rejected the baptism of children with contempt and believed that it should be replaced by a baptism exclusively for believers or those who have repented.

Kurtz (1904, p. 240) points out that most Anabaptists wanted to see the end of the church (and the state) and that this was a major reason for their rejection of the baptism of children, since this practice added thousands of members to the church yearly, several of whom would never come to true faith. There was, therefore, more at play than just a dogmatic view. This rejection of the baptism of children should therefore also not be confused with support for 'adult' baptism, as the issue was not with those who did not understand (because they were young children) but with those who did not believe (irrespective of their age and ability to understand).

Also, note the special emphasis that De Brès placed on revelation in Article 2 and how he organically develops this in the following articles.

After authorities in several areas persecuted hundreds of Anabaptists, and especially after the death of the Anabaptist leader Felix Manz, a 'once off' confession of some sort was drawn up in 1527 at Schleitheim under the leadership of Michael Sattler (cf. De Jong 1980, p. 182; Villa-Vicentio 1986, p. 71; Walker et al. 1997, p. 452 for the text of the declaration). The most significant points were:

- Baptism was only to be administered to believers.
- Church discipline (excommunication) had to be implemented before every Holy Communion and thus upon everyone who forsook their baptism with their way of life. (Someone like Menno Simmons, who held some perfectionist views, later believed that the congregation had to be without spot or wrinkle – Eph 5:27.)
- Communion was meant exclusively for those who were baptised.
- It was demanded that the baptised would separate themselves from this world and had the implication that the baptised may not have contact with nonbelievers or with any papal or anti-papal activities.

- The baptised were not to use weapons, such as swords. Church discipline was the church's only weapon.
- The Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Zwinglian liturgies were expressly forbidden as unchristian.
- While authorities were a necessity in this sinful world, the baptised were not to hold any positions within it.
- No oaths were to be taken.

According to De Jong (1980, p. 183), this declaration characterised the Anabaptists as 'world shunning' communities who tried to convince people by their Anabaptist way of life rather than through preaching that the Anabaptists were the true representatives of a biblical church. (Also note the emphasis that the Belgic Confession's Art. 29 places on preaching as a mark of the true church.)

Shortly after drawing up this declaration, Sattler was captured and executed. Anabaptism, however, continued to grow. When a decree – which was issued by Ferdinand of Austria in 1528 and which brought widespread suffering – did not succeed in bringing the movement to an end, both Roman Catholic and Lutheran states implemented ancient Roman laws prohibiting heresy against the Anabaptists at the Diets of Speyer (1529) and Augsburg (1530). This meant that mere membership was punishable by death. In most Protestant areas, the Anabaptists were not treated as heretics but as divisionists [*scheurmakers*] and, if they did not recant, they were allowed to emigrate. Yet between 1530 and 1537, thousands of people in the northern parts of the 'nether lands' started to support Anabaptism.

Amidst a series of events in which some of the Anabaptists caused a good deal of disorder and many were executed (cf. Muller 2010, p. 28), the Westphalian city of Münster was identified as the new Jerusalem to which Jesus Christ would return. After the local civil and ecclesiastical authorities were convinced of Anabaptism, every citizen who did not want to join the movement was expelled from the city on 27 February 1534. Common ownership of property (in line with Ac 2) was instituted, and it was declared that the world had to be purified by the sword. When Jan Matthys died in a subsequent skirmish with the Roman Catholic army who laid siege to the city, Johan Beukelszoon of Leiden took over the leadership to rule the 'New Sion' as the 'king of justice' and decided to institute 'biblical practices' such as polygamy. Some citizens also stopped wearing clothes in public, as this was regarded as part of this sinful world which they had left behind. In June 1535, sixteen months after the expulsion of the citizens, Münster was retaken by the Roman Catholic authorities. The leaders were tortured excessively, for example, through the use of flaming hot pliers. As a warning, their corpses were hung from the tower of the St Lambert Cathedral (Kurtz 1904, p. 263).

After this tragic set of events, the leadership of the movement was taken up by Menno Simons, a peace-loving former Roman Catholic priest who

ministered in the north of the 'nether lands'. Yet many Anabaptists had no other option than to retain their membership of the local church in public, while supporting the movement in secret. By the time that Simons died (peacefully, of natural causes!) in 1561, he had built up such a reputation that his followers became known as Mennonites – the name that their descendants use even today (cf. George 1988, p. 262).

The tragic events at Münster, however, cost the Anabaptist movement most of the sympathy that it had built up amongst several thousands of people. It was clear that their claims (e.g. of the imminent return of Christ) were false. (Note Belgic Confession Art. 37.) They also came to be regarded as enemies of the state and of good order and healthy morals within society – a development that is significant for this study.

This saga not only sent shockwaves through western Europe, but it also provided rulers (civil and ecclesiastical) with a believable excuse to react violently towards parties that seemed to oppose their authority for the sake of their faith. Many rulers and citizens saw it as part of their duty to protect the society of the time against such movements.

The Anabaptists were the first to propagate a complete separation of church and state (Walker et al. 1997, p. 449) – an idea that was entirely radical within the *corpus christianum* whose roots, as indicated above, could be traced back to the fourth century. They were primarily persecuted for challenging the thousand-year-old idea that religious unity was required for (national) peace. Their attempts to form separated communities, where common ownership was instituted, were seen as undermining stability (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 36). De Jong (1980, p. 186) points out that at the time when the Anabaptists emerged, the authorities in southern Europe had become very sensitive towards any dissident ideas regarding religion and society. The fact that the Anabaptists refused to perform military service, to take an oath of allegiance (certainly not to a king of this world) or, at times, pay taxes was seen as undermining the very moral fabric and good order within society.

It is necessary to take note that it was not only the authorities (including the civil and especially the Roman Catholic–minded ecclesiastical authorities) who opposed Anabaptism. Reformers such as Zwingli (in Zürich and elsewhere in Switzerland) and Martin Bucer in Strasbourg opposed them vigorously. Luther opposed them for distortion of the gospel of salvation through faith alone and accused them of believing in salvation by good works. Even the peace-loving Melanchthon viewed them as enemies of a healthy sociopolitical order (Walker et al. 1997, p. 455). In his letter to King Francis I, Calvin also distanced himself from them because he saw them as revolutionaries (Cloete 1986, p. 55). Cloete provides a broad overview of the relationship between the Reformers and Anabaptists and

how it became worse with time. He comes to the conclusion that, apart from their different beliefs, the Reformers regarded the Anabaptists as irresponsible for often putting the Reformers' lives and livelihoods in unnecessary danger through their actions. To this he adds the view that the members of the two groups simply did not like each other.

It is fitting to close this section with De Brès's view of the Anabaptists. After Vonk (1956, pp. 598–606) quotes extensively from De Brès's work *La racine, source et fondement des Anabaptistes*, he ends with De Brès's rejection of the ideas of Menno Simons. According to De Brès, Simons pleaded that governments should show clemency towards criminals who repented and that they should escape punishment. De Brès felt that the authorities should not be too lenient, as freed criminals may disturb the peace and order within society. De Brès was, however, not without sympathy for all Anabaptists. Vonk (1956, p. 606) upholds that even though De Brès wholeheartedly abhorred the teachings of the Anabaptists and considered these teachings to be a great and unceasing danger to existing governments through their threat of revolution and terror, he supported affording clemency to those Anabaptists who did not act on these threats. De Brès also believed that the authorities should not persecute Anabaptists with fire and the sword but that they should rather, as Hezekiah and Josiah did, first clean up the idolatry and then ensure that the true Apostolic doctrine is preached to them. It would be the best medicine against the evil of the Anabaptists, 'among whom there were so many poor, misled, uninformed and simple people' (Vonk 1956, p. 606). While De Brès at times supported the death penalty for Anabaptist leaders, he had much sympathy for the unsophisticated followers who were left practically uneducated by the Roman Catholic Church.

■ Guido de Brès: The primary author of the Belgic Confession

There is a consensus that the Belgic Confession was written by De Brès (see especially the biography by Van Langeraad 1884, pp. 116, 117). Although he had some help from Reformers such as Saravia and Herman Moded, and while he showed the confession before its first publication to as many Reformed minsters as he could find, the confession is generally attributed to him (Biesterveld 1912, p. 20; Doekes 1975, p. 54; Polman s.a., p. 108; Van Itterzon 1983, p. 97).

■ Guy who? From Belgium?

There is, however, some confusion in the way by which his name and surname is used in popular and academic literature. Apart from the

aforementioned Flemish and Dutch versions of his name (Guido), in French he is referred to as 'Guy de Bräs' or 'Guy de Bres' (cf. Braekman's 1960 biography). His surname is also often spelt as 'De Bray'. He is furthermore referred to by different combinations of these three versions of his name and surname. 'De Bres' is also sometimes written without the accent or even as 'deBres'. 'De Bras' is sometimes spelt without the diaeresis. All of this is not only confusing when running an electronic search, but it even complicates searching for his name in the index of a physical book.

While De Brès's mother tongue was Picardian French, one should perhaps not be too surprised by these French, Flemish and Dutch versions and combinations of his name. He was born and raised just north of the border between the present-day Belgium and France in the regional capital city of Bergen, today mostly known by its French name as Mons. Mons lies about 60 km to the southwest of Brussels (Bruxelles) and is the capital city of the Hainaut (Henegouwen in Dutch) region, which falls within the Wallonian (Waalse in Dutch) province of Belgium.

It should, however, be kept in mind that at the time of De Brès's birth, the area was part of the 'nether lands', literally the 'Low Countries' or 'low areas'. At that time, as indicated above, the name was mostly used in geographical rather than political terms. The area that is today covered by Belgium (which only formally became a national state much later) was at that time considered to be the southern part of the 'nether lands'. This explains why the confession is named the *Confessio Belgica* in Latin, the Belgic Confession in English, the *Nederlandsche Geloofsbelijdenis* or *Onze geloofsbelijdenis* in Dutch and the *Nederlandse Geloofsbelydenis* (NGB) in Afrikaans – even though the confession was not written in the modern-day Netherlands.

Apart from the fact that the region is, even today, well known for the inhabitants' multilingual ability and similarly multilingual place names, 'Guido de Brès' has become known mostly within Dutch and English rather than in French circles. For this reason, the Dutch version of his name will be used primarily throughout this publication.

■ Converted via personal Bible study

De Brès was born circa 1522 as the fourth child of Jean de Brès, who was a stained-glass painter. De Brès received the Roman Catholic education of the time. He would have followed in his father's footsteps had he not found a Bible, and after some expressly forbidden study, he was converted to the Reformed version of the Christian faith in 1547, aged 25.

The fact that De Brès accepted the Reformed faith after intense study of the Bible, as well as his willingness to suffer martyrdom for its pure

proclamation, is an indication that the emphasis that he placed on the necessity and value of Scripture (cf. especially Belgic Confession Art. 2–7, 29) did not merely spring from a theology that he was taught but also from an intensely personal experience.

Because of the persecution in the 'nether lands', and specifically the cruel way in which it was carried out where De Brès lived in Mons, he fled to London in 1548, where a refugee congregation had been established four years earlier (Dreyer 1997, p. 1217). Gadsby (1976) indicates that the death of King Henry VIII and Thomas Cranmer's attempts at Reformation meant that England had become very suitable. At this time, De Brès received his first theological training under capable Reformed theologians such as Bucer, Marten Micron (Hofmeyr & Van Niekerk 1989, p. 5) and later Johannes à Lasco and Peter Datheen (Strauss 1993, p. 503). It was also in London where he was introduced to the work of Calvin. There are indications that De Brès was in fact later personally trained by Calvin and Theodore Beza (Hofmeyr & Van Niekerk 1989, p. 5). Strauss (1993, p. 504) adds that De Brès also corresponded with Calvin.

■ An itinerant minister and author

After spending some four years in England, De Brès returned to the southern parts of the 'nether lands' in 1552 to minister in a Walloon congregation in Rijsel (Lille), which met in secret and was known as the Church of the Rose. Lille is about 60 km to the west of Mons. In 1555, De Brès published his first book, *Le Baston de la Foy Chrétienne*. It was soon translated into Dutch as the *Staf des geloofs* [The weapon or staff of the Christian faith] (cf. Polman s.a., p. 104; Schulze 1991, p. 31). In this work, De Brès not only defended the Reformed faith against that of the Roman Catholic Church, but he also refuted the Anabaptists' views. The work contains several citations from the church fathers and the ecclesiastical councils – a clear indication of how well-read he was (Van Itterzon 1983, p. 98).

In the same year, the Diet of Augsburg formally accepted the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* which, as discussed, legitimated limited religious freedom. It was, furthermore, also the year in which Philip II succeeded his father, Charles V, and became King of Spain and the lord of the 'nether lands'. Philip's persecutions (as also previously discussed) nearly annihilated De Brès's congregation. In 1556, De Brès had to flee again, this time via Ghent to Frankfurt am Main, where he probably had contact with Johannes à Lasco and participated in a dispute with Anabaptists. While the details are sketchy, there are indications that De Brès went to Basel and perhaps even to Geneva and could have met Calvin, Beza and Jean Crespin before returning to the southern 'nether lands' in 1559 (Strauss 1993, p. 504; Van Itterzon 1983, p. 98; cf. also Gadsby 1976).

In the 'nether lands', De Brès continued with his ministry in the so-called Church of the Palms, in Doornik (Tournai), some 20 km to the east of Lille, in the general direction of Mons. Doornik was founded in 50 BC by the Romans and is not only one of the most ancient cities in the area, but it has often served as a military stronghold through the centuries.

In Doornik, De Brès married Cathérine Ramon, with whom he would have four or five[4] children and to whom he would later write a heart-wrenching letter from prison some days before his execution. Masked and using Jérôme as a pseudonym, De Brès started to expand his ministry to Mons, Rijsen (Lille), Douai and Valenciennes. It was also in 1559 that Crespin asked De Brès to compile a list (in French and Latin) of the martyrs in the areas in which he was residing. De Brès's accurate efforts were included in Crespin's well-known *Histoire des martyrs*. As has been indicated, it is clear that De Brès did not work in isolation.

■ Doornik, 1561

De Brès had already, in 1559, started to gather confessions that enjoyed wide acceptance within the Reformed community. At the beginning of 1561, De Brès started to distribute the first copies of the *Confession de Foi* (Hofmeyr & Van Niekerk 1989, p. 3). Van Langeraad (1884, p. 120) remarks in De Brès's biography that he did not, in the first instance, intend to formulate the widely accepted confession that the Belgic Confession has since become, but that he was mainly putting the key beliefs of his congregation, the Church of the Palms, on paper.

De Brès also expected his congregants to formally denounce the pope and the Roman Catholic Church (Nauta, Van Dooren & De Jong 1971, p. 27). Strauss (1993, p. 502) says that at that time, nearly half of Doornik were Protestant and made little secret of the fact that they were Calvinists. De Brès preferred the Reformation to work its way through the city quietly, like yeast. However, during the night of 29 September 1561, hundreds of Protestants gathered in the market square and walked through the streets singing psalms (as composed by Clément Marot). Fearing a rebellion, the authorities had shots fired at the protesters. This had little effect, for the next evening more than 500 protesters, now masked, went out to sing psalms in front of the bishop's home. While the bishop was in Brussels at the time, commissioners were sent to interrogate the population – torturing several. The Church of the Palms was exposed. According to the commissioners, these Protestants were no better than the Anabaptists. Consequently, during the nights of 01 and 02 November 1961, De Brès threw the package containing

4. While De Brès mentions five children in his letter, the couple might not have been the biological parents of all of them.

the confession and the accompanying anonymous letter over the wall of the castle. As stated, he did not write this letter just for his own sake and in order to defend his congregation, but also for the sake of more than 100,000 believers in the 'nether lands' (Doekes 1975, p. 56).

At that time, the commissioners who had been appointed by the area's regent, Margaret of Parma, half-sister of King Philip II, were in the castle, meeting on how to keep the Protestants under control. Jesuits convinced Margaret that she would be serving Christ if she was able to exterminate the Protestants (Cloete 1986, p. 78). In light of the persecutions that the Protestants had already been suffering under Charles V since around 1528, De Brès aimed to state the Reformed faith clearly. While he wanted to indicate the differences from the Roman Catholic views, he especially wanted to distinguish the Reformed faith from that of the Anabaptists. He aimed to indicate that, unlike many Anabaptists who did not want anything to do with any civil (earthly) government, that the Reformed Christians wanted to be law-abiding subjects of King Philip II. They wanted to obey his government in all things lawful, and that 'having the fear of the Lord before their eyes, and being terrified by the threatening of Christ, who had declared in the gospel that he would deny them before the father, in case they denied him before men', they therefore 'offered him their backs to stripes and their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags and their whole bodies to the fire' rather than being disobedient lawbreakers. In Article 36 of the confession, he clearly stated:

> He (our gracious God) *wants the world to be governed by laws and statutes* […] Moreover, *everyone* – no matter of what quality, condition, or rank – *ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them* in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God. We ought *to pray for them*, that God may direct them in all their ways and that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. […] *For that reason, we condemn the Anabaptists and other rebellious people, and in general all those who reject the authorities and civil officers, subvert justice*, introduce a communion of goods, and overturn the decency that God has established among men. [*author's added emphasis*]

In a sense, the Reformed Christians only wanted to be sound 16th-century Catholic Christians whose faith was in line with the Scriptures and the ancient ecclesiastical councils (cf. Jonker 1994, pp. 50, 65). In De Brès's mind, the revolutionary image that the authorities (rightfully and otherwise) had of the Anabaptists did not fit Reformed Christians. He also argued that these Christians were, unlike some of the Anabaptists, not a threat to the moral fibre of society and the proper order within it.

Despite the content of the package that was sent to Margaret on 19 December, De Brès did not, however, succeed in his attempts to safeguard his congregation. Even though a certain Jérôme was wrongly suspected of

being behind the protests, it was soon discovered that De Brès was responsible for the package, but by then he had fled the city.

Polman (s.a., p. 105) narrates an ironic and somewhat tragic incident that happened a day or so after De Brès fled. Some of his friends knew that he had left several hundred copies of the confession in his study. Fearing discovery, they decided to burn the copies outside in the garden. However, the neighbours saw the large fire and came to their rescue – only to discover the copies! After this, De Brès's library, containing works of Luther, Bucer, Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger and Calvin, was also discovered by the authorities (Strauss 1993). Polman mentions that the notes that De Brès had made on these works are a further indication that he was immersed in Reformed thinking. The books and documents were, however, listed and then burned, and soon after this, Doornik was surrounded by Roman Catholic forces. By January 1562, very little was left of the congregation.

After his escape from Doornik, De Brès continued his ministry somewhat further to the south, in cities such as Amiens and Sedan in the north of France. He was in the service of the influential Henri-Robert de la Marck, Duke of Bouillon, and along with his family, he enjoyed five years (more or less) of relative peace. He did, however, continue to visit Doornik and even Antwerp from time to time, warning the congregation in 1566 against Anabaptism (Van Itterzon 1983, p. 99).

While the confession is De Brès's most well-known work, it was not the final work that he wrote against the Anabaptists and within which his attitude towards them can be seen. During his ministry in Sedan, he published a book of more than 800 pages, *La racine, source et fondement des Anabaptistes* or *The root, source and foundation of the Anabaptists*. In this book, published in 1565, he refuted Anabaptists' views on the incarnation of Christ, baptism of children and the worldly (civil) authorities.

■ Valenciennes, 1566

As described, when Margaret responded with vague promises to the request of the members of the pact or covenant of minor nobles [*Eedverbond der Edelen*], the population saw this as a turning point. It triggered a series of events that would bring ruin to cities like Valenciennes, where De Brès had been ministering.

In the previous year, the Reformed congregation in Valenciennes called a young French minister, Pérégrin de la Grange. Large numbers of people started to attend the services which were held outside the city. On 10 August, De Brès preached there for the first time in quite a while. It was, relatively speaking, only the Roman Catholic clerics and businessmen who had longstanding relationships with the church who did

not attend the services. The authorities tried in vain to put an end to the services. On 24 August, images were removed from the church building in order for it to be used for a Reformed worship service and preaching. After several events, the authorities declared in a placard of 14 December that the city had rebelled. Spanish troops led by Philip of Noircarmes laid siege to the city. De Brès's opinion, true to his conviction, was that Valenciennes had to submit to King Philip II. His opinion was dismissed. On 23 March, the city was captured.

Vonk (1956, pp. 612–614) discusses the accusations that the authorities made in the placard of 14 December, as well as the city's response, and clearly indicates that the accusations were false. Yet, De Brès was chained up in sewage in the lowest part of the notorious Brunain prison. It is telling that when he was offered assistance to attempt an escape, he rejected this offer as he saw such an attempt as a rejection of legitimate civil authority and therefore a transgression of the fifth commandment. During the six weeks he was held, he wrote an extensive treatise on the Lord's Supper and a number of letters, for example, to his wife and mother. Some of these letters have survived and give insight into how his Reformed theology (e.g. on divine providence) determined his decisions. On 31 May 1567, De Brès, along with De la Grange, were publicly hanged in the market square in Valenciennes. Guido de Brès was 44 or 45 years old.

■ A confession of the faith of the church in Doornik that became the Belgic Confession, one of the three forms of Reformed confessional unity

It has been indicated earlier that while De Brès stated in his accompanying letter that his plea is on behalf of more than 100,000 believers across the 'nether lands', he did not start out by aiming to formulate a standard of the Reformed faith. Yet his formulation of the faith of the Church of the Palms in Doornik was not only soon widely accepted throughout the 'nether lands' as an accurate and helpful expression of Reformed belief (cf. Schulze 1991, p. 34), but the Synod of Dort also accepted it as one of what became known as *the three forms of* (Reformed confessional) *unity*.

It has been indicated previously that De Brès consulted other Reformed theologians and influential leaders in the church when formulating the confession. It has also been indicated that he started in 1559 to gather confessions that enjoyed favour within the Reformed churches. Cloete (1986, p. 159), who made a detailed comparison of the Belgic and other Reformed confessions, came to the conclusion that the Belgic Confession is thematically 'more or less in the middle' and does not contain radical or unique content. It is therefore not surprising that the confession that De Brès compiled soon found wide and lasting acceptance.

As early as 1561, the confession was referred to as the Confession of Antwerp (*Confession d'Anvers*, cf. Doekes 1975, p. 56). Two years later, the provincial Synod of Armentières decided that the office-bearers elected by the congregations must sign the 'confession set and accepted[5] among us' (Doekes 1975, p. 56; Schulze 1991, p. 34). The Convention of Wesel (1568) followed this by determining that ministers, before their confirmation, had to show their consent to the confession. The Synod of Emden (1571) signed the confession and required that future ministers should also sign it before their confirmation as ministers. In 1574, the first Synod of Holland and Zeeland decided that not only elders and deacons had to sign the confession, but teachers too.

All of this followed a decision of the Synod of Antwerp (1566) that henceforth the confession had to be read at the beginning of all synods so that the churches could express their consent and mutual unity and to hear if there was anything that needed to be changed. A number of amendments were made to the text. These were not substantial and were made for the sake of clarification (Doekes 1975, pp. 56, 57; cf. also Vonk 1956, pp. 649–655). It did, however, mean that varied versions came into existence.

It is somewhat ironic that after the Remonstrants brought charges against the confession, the Synod of Veere (1611), after making some changes, decided to publish a standard edition. It was this 1612 edition that formed the basis of the text that was discussed, and after also making some minor changes, accepted at the pivotal 1618–1619 Synod of Dort (Doekes 1975, p. 58). The synod, for instance, on account of the Remonstrants, inserted the word 'almighty' in the first article, but rejected their request for a total revision of the confession (as well as of the Heidelberg). Since this synod, the Belgic Confession has, along with the Heidelberg Confession and the Canons of Dort, been internationally accepted as one of three forms of unity amongst Reformed churches.

■ The present-day acceptance of the Belgic Confession

Pinpointing the number of churches or Christians who accept the Belgic Confession today will require a research project on its own. It can, however, be stated that Christians all over the world align themselves, with varying degrees of consent, to this confession. Church groups that subscribe to the Belgic Confession as a formal standard (mostly as part of the so-called 'three forms of unity') include the following.

5. Dutch: *vastgesteld*.

■ The Netherlands

As to be expected, most Dutch Reformed Protestant churches subscribe to the Belgic Confession. The largest of these is the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (*Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* [PKN][6]), which was formally constituted on 01 May 2004 after a merger of the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* [NHK]), the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* [GKN-*Synodalen*]) and the *Evangelisch Lutherische Kirche* in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Both the NHK and the GKN-*Synodalen* have always subscribed to the Belgic Confession. Partly because the merger included the Evangelisch Lutherische Kirche, it was decided that every newly convened local church could decide which confessions they would subscribe to. (I did not, however, find any church that did not subscribe to the Belgic Confession.) Since both the NHK and the GKN subscribed to the confession before the merger, those (e.g. the *De Gereformeerde Kerk* [with the '*De*' as part of its name] and the *Hersteld Hervormde Kerk*) who did not go along with the merger still subscribe to it. The Reformed Association (*Gereformeerde Bond*[7]), which has also always subscribed to the Belgic Confession, opposed the merger but has decided to go along.

Most, if not all, of the other major Reformed churches in the Netherlands also subscribe to the Belgic Confession. These include the second-largest Protestant denomination [Afrikaans: *kerkverband*], namely the Christian Reformed Churches (*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* [CGK], originating after a merger in 1892); the Reformed Churches Liberated (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland Vrijgemaakt* [GK-*Vrijgemaakt*]), who broke with the GKN-*Synoldalen* in 1944; as well as the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken (NGK), who broke with the GK-*Vrijgemaakt* in 1967 but are currently in discussions to merge with the GK-*Vrijgemaakt* in order to become the *Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken*.[8] The Belgic Confession is also subscribed to by the Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands and North America (*Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland en Noord-Amerika*), which originated after a merger in 1907[9] and by the Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands, who broke with the former in 1953.

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6. PKN: https://protestantsekerk.nl/over-ons/.

7. Gereformeerde Bond: https://gereformeerdebond.nl/over-de-gb/geschiedenis/.

8. NGK, Nederlands(e) Gereformeerde Kerken: https://ngk.nl/.

9. *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*: https://www.gergeminfo.nl/over-gergeminfo/wie-zijn-wij.

■ Churches beyond the borders of the Netherlands

As is to be expected, churches that stemmed from of the Dutch Reformed Church and those churches who were part of it before reorganising themselves as other 'denominations' or 'federations' also accept the Belgic Confession. This is of course dependant on when and from whom a church was transplanted.

■ Churches in Africa

The charter the Dutch government granted to the Dutch East India Company (DEIC) determined that the company should also take care of the spiritual needs of its employees who had to work outside of the Netherlands. In this way, the Reformed faith was planted at the southern tip of Africa in 1652. From here, the Reformed churches (mostly called *Gereformeerd* and at times *Hervormd*), which were, apart from the Lutheran Church, the only churches allowed until the late 18th century, spread northwards throughout Africa. In the process, the following 'denominations' originated – all subscribing to the Belgic Confession: the current Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk*), the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (*Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika* [NHKA], originating in 1941); the Reformed Churches in South Africa (*Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika*, GKSA, originating in 1859). Several churches were planted from these three to include Reformed churches in Namibia, Eswatini[10] and Botswana.[11] The Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) was planted in Malawi, Zimbabwe[12] and Zambia. The NGK also planted ethnically aligned churches in South Africa that merged, in 1994, into the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa (URCSA, or VGKSA – *Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika*), of which the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, which formulated the Belhar Confession, was a constituting member.

■ Churches in America

The Reformed churches in North America can, to some extent, be divided into those churches that were part of the original migration to the continent (and before the major schisms in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands) and those churches that were planted or experienced significant growth since the Second World War (WWII).

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10. Eswatini – probable: https://rff.christians.co.za/the-swaziland-reformed-church-src/.

11. Botswana: https://rff.christians.co.za/the-dutch-reformed-church-in-botswana-drcb/.

12. Zimbabwe and Zambia – CCAP: https://rff.christians.co.za/2022/03/19/the-church-of-central-africa-presbyterian-ccap-harare-synod-zimbabwe/.

These churches include the Reformed Church in America (RCA[13]), whose first members convened in 1628; the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA[14]), which was also transplanted by Dutch immigrants and was 'officially born in 1857'; the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA[15]), which separated from the CRC in 1924; and the Canadian and American Reformed Churches (CANRC,[16] 1950) whose members stemmed from the 1944 GK-*Vrijgemaakt* and broke with that group in 2019; and the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA[17]), whose first synod met in 1996.

The *Igrejas Reformada do Brasil*[18] provides an example of churches in South America that subscribe to the Belgic Confession as one of the three forms of unity.

■ Churches in Australia and New Zealand

Similar to the development in the USA, Reformed churches sprang up in Australia and New Zealand after WWII. The Christian Reformed Churches of Australia (CRCA,[19] 1951) subscribes to the three forms of unity and the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA,[20] 1951), which is part of an international federation of free churches, subscribes to the Belgic Confession along with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort.

This is also the case across the Tasman Sea for the Reformed Churches of New Zealand (RCNZ,[21] 1953). A Reformed Baptist Church, such as the Covenant Grace Baptist Church,[22] accepts the Belgic Confession along with the Canons of Dort, the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith and the Apostles' and the Nicene Creeds. Interestingly, the Heidelberg Catechism is not listed, nor the Creed of Athanasius – although it is named in Article 9 of the Belgic Confession.

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13. RCA: https://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/.

14. CRCNA: https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession.

15. PRCA: http://www.prca.org/about/official-standards/creeds/three-forms-of-unity/belgic-confession.

16. CANRC: https://canrc.org/the-belgic-confession.

17. URCNA: https://www.urcna.org/sysfiles/member/custom/custom.cfm?memberid=1651&customid=24288.

18. Brazil: https://missionboardbrazil.org/the-irb-churches/.

19. CRCA: https://crca.org.au/about-the-crca/beliefs/the-belgic-confession. In Chapter 11, attention will be paid to how Article 36 of the Belgic Confession is presented.

20. FRCA: https://frca.org.au/ourfederation/creedsconfessions/.

21. https://rcnz.org.nz/creeds-and-confessions/ & https://rcnz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/belgic.pdf.

22. https://www.covenantgracebaptist.church/about-us/#1500258551772-2144cd73-98ce.

■ Other churches and ecumenical bodies

The Reformed Church in Sri Lanka, which held its first service in 1642, is also part of the list of churches outside the traditional sphere of Christianity that accept the Belgic Confession being one of the three forms of unity. The First Evangelical Reformed Church (FERC) in Singapore also accepts the 'three historical Reformed creeds', including the Belgic Confession.[23] The Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church (CERC[24]) in Singapore also accepts the three forms of unity, including versions in Chinese. The Covenant Grace Church[25] in Penang, Thailand, accepts the Belgic Confession as part of the three forms of unity, as well as the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The Covenant Protestant Reformed Church (CPRC[26]) in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, is an example of a rather young church that subscribes to the Belgic Confession as one of the three forms of unity. Apart from the ecumenical creeds, this church also confesses the Chalcedonian Creed of 451 AD.

An ecumenical body such as the World Reformed Fellowship, which was instituted in 1994, requires of its member churches to subscribe to at least one of the listed confessions, which includes the Belgic Confession.

■ Some churches which subscribe to the Westminster Confession instead of the Belgic Confession

It is interesting to note that several churches who, apart from the ecumenical creeds, subscribe to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort also subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) rather than to the Belgic Confession. One example of this is the Reformed Church in Japan (planted in 1946).

This category also includes the Reformed Church of East Africa (RCEA), of which most congregations are in Kenya.[27] Their first churches were planted at the start of the 20th century by Reformed South Africans after roughly 1,300 South Africans decided to escape British rule after the 1899–1902 war. The *Tarayyar Ekklisiyar Kristi a Nigeria* (TEKAN), formerly known as the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (CRC-N), accepts ecumenical creeds,

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23. FERC (Singapore): https://ferc.org.sg/about/us.

24. CERC (Singapore), Chinese version of the Belgic Confession: http://cerc.org.sg/about.php.

25. Covenant Grace Church: http://covenantgrace.church/what-we-believe/.

26. CPRC Northern Ireland: https://cprc.co.uk/.

27. RCEA/Kenya: https://rff.christians.co.za/the-reformed-church-of-east-africa-rcea/.

the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, the Second Helvetic and the Westminster Confessions, yet not the Belgic Confession.

While the other four synods of the CCAP, whose churches are located in Malawi and Zimbabwe, accept the Belgic Confession (along with the Heidelberg and the Canons of Dort), the Zambia Synod accepts the Westminster Confession, the 39 Articles, the French Confession, the Scots and Second Helvetic Confessions.

The Presbyterian Church USA (PC USA[28]) accepts no fewer than twelve creeds and confessions, including the Westminster Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, but not the Belgic Confession or the Canons of Dort.

■ The structure of the Belgic Confession

'We believe that […]'

The confession contains 37 articles. Every article starts in the first-person plural, pronoun 'we', and mostly with: 'We believe that […]'. In some of the first articles it is stated that: We 'know' (Art. 2); 'confess' (Art. 3); 'receive' (Art. 5); 'distinguish' (Art. 6). Significantly, Article 1 starts with 'we *all*[29] believe that', stating that 'We all believe with our hearts and confess with our mouths that […]' – a statement of certainty, clearly and fittingly echoing Romans 10:9–11.

Article 8, in which the belief in the Triune God is stated, is the only article that starts out with: 'We believe in […]'. It is clear that the Belgic Confession is a statement or an expression of sincerely shared faith and not merely a dogmatic exposition of what certain Christians believe.

While the confessors therefore start out in a somewhat scholastic tone, stating the shared belief in the existence of 'a being' that 'we call God', they then move on methodically from identifying key aspects of how God is and how he in turn makes himself known, to *who* he is, namely the Triune God. In this, there is a similar logic to that which Paul follows in Acts 17, where he also works from the most general to the very personal.

The Belgic Confession is Trinitarian in its content and structure. It follows the order of the Apostles' Creed, similar to what Calvin does in his *Institutes*.

The Heidelberg Catechism, one of the so-called three forms of unity, also has a distinct way of presenting the belief in the Triune God, structuring it intentionally on the Apostles' Creed – compare Lord's Days 8–24 as a response to the question on what a Christian should believe.

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28. PC USA: https://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/boc2016.pdf.

29. My added emphasis.

It may seem as if the Apostles' Creed has a fourfold rather than a threefold structure (belief in the Father, in the Son and in the Holy Spirit) and that the last four statements (about the church, forgiveness, eternal life and resurrection) form a separate unit. While there certainly is a separation, as there is a clear separation between the Creator and the created, everything that is confessed about the church as a renewed creation flows from who the Triune God is, and what he has done, is doing and will do. Jonker (1994, p. 52) agrees with Noordmans that when the Apostolic Creed turns to the church, it is not about the church as an earthly, religious group, but about the church as an object of faith, the church as the body within which members have been baptised in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. When turning to the church, the focus is still on God and his redemption (*heil*).

The same logic is followed in the structure of the Belgic Confession. It underlines the continuity with the church of the ages and the belief in the Trinity as the grounding motive.

Broadly speaking, according to Jonker (1994, p. 53), the Belgic Confession reflects the theological loci and has been structured as follows:

- Articles 1–11: The Triune God and his revelation
- Articles 12–17: The Father, his works in creation and preservation
- Articles 18–21: The Son and reconciliation
- Articles 22–35: The Holy Spirit, his realisation of the salvation
- Articles 22–26: The redemption of the individual
- Articles 27–32: The Church as the fruit of the redemptive work of the Spirit
- Articles 33–35: The means of redemption used by the Spirit (baptism and communion)
- Articles 36–37: The work of the Spirit in the preservation of justice.

Van Bruggen (1980, p. 16) provides a simplified structure which assists in generating a bird's-eye view of the confession:

- Articles 1–11: God and the means by which he is known
- Articles 12–15: Creation, providence, the fall into sin and its consequences
- Articles 16–26: The election, Christ and the beneficial works of redemption
- Articles 27–37: The church, its sacraments and its protectors.

Polman (s.a., p. 108), who wrote an extensive commentary on the Belgic Confession, provides the following structure:

- Articles 1–11: God and the means by which he may be known
- Articles 12–15: Creation, providence, the fall into sin and its consequences
- Articles 16–17: The election and the restoration of the fallen humanity
- Articles 18–21: Christ
- Articles 22–26: The redemptive works
- Articles 27–35: The church and the means of grace

• Articles 36–37: The government and the final things.

When reflecting on the different structures that respective authors provide (of which only three of several have been provided here so far), it is firstly clear, as well as understandable, that every author's own theological perspective (even if it is shared) has an influence on the structure that is identified within the Belgic Confession.

It is secondly also clear that while some articles (e.g. Arts. 1–11 and 27–35) can be grouped together in a neat, logical way, others seem to defy such attempts. While this aspect of the Belgic Confession is not unique, and while this should certainly be recognised, it can be explained by keeping in mind that De Brès's primary intention was to state beliefs, not to order them. He and those who followed him in using the Belgic Confession to express their faith certainly strove to present their beliefs in a well-structured way, but this was and still is not the primary aim. While the basic tenets are certainly linked, the reactionary nature of a confession requires that primarily only that which needs to be stated at a certain time is stated. A confession or a creed is an answer or a response addressing a certain question or issue. While the content of the answer comes, from a Reformed point of view, from Scripture (cf. Arts. 2–7 of the Belgic Confession!), the issue on the table provides the broad lines of what will be a relevant response and what not. Since the issues are not necessarily clearly linked, the responses will also not necessarily be. As far as the Belgic Confession is concerned, its apologetic aspect as a confession of the Christian faith amidst accusations of heresy should be kept in mind. This is also one of the reasons why Churches often do not accept a single confession but rather a whole bouquet of creeds and confessions to express their faith truthfully.

For the sake of this book, the following articles have been allocated to the following chapters in an effort to allow each author to highlight the contemporary relevance of the beliefs stated in the Belgic Confession:

• **Chapter 2 – Article 1:** On the belief in God
  R Fick: 'Belgic Confession Article 1: The only God'

• **Chapter 3 – Articles 2–7:** On revelation, especially via Scripture
  AJ Coetsee: 'Reading Scripture as God's revelation: Perspectives from Belgic Confession Articles 2–7'

• **Chapter 4 – Articles 8–11:** On the Triune God
  G van den Brink: 'All these are equal: The doctrine of the Trinity in the Belgic Confession (Articles 8–11)'

• **Chapter 5 – Articles 12–15:** On God's works in creation and redemption
  RM Potgieter: 'Unassailable faith statements encompassing creation, providence, humanity and fall, original sin: The Belgic Confession Articles 12–15'

- **Chapter 6 – Article 16–19:** On Christ, the incarnated saviour
  SP van der Walt: 'With Christology, everything is at stake: Insights from the Belgic Confession Articles 16–19'

- **Chapter 7 – Articles 20–23:**
  HH van Alten: 'God's justice and our righteousness: Belgic Confession Articles 20–23'

- **Chapter 8 – Articles 24–26:** On God's sanctifying work in those who believe
  M Kotzé: 'Regeneration and human access to the divine in contemporary theological and ethical thought: A reflection on the Belgic Confession Articles 24–26'

- **Chapter 9 – Articles 27–29:** On the Church of God
  W Dreyer: 'Towards a relevant ecclesiology: An exposition of Articles 27–29 of the Belgic Confession'

- **Chapter 10 – Articles 30–32:** On governing the church in an orderly way by those gifted and called for this
  L van den Broeke: 'To keep God's holy order: The relevance of Reformed governance in Articles 30–32 of the Belgic Confession for churches today'

- **Chapter 11 – Articles 33–35:** On the God-given sacraments: baptism and Holy Communion
  P Paul Kruger: 'Widening wings? Re-emphasising sacramental "joyful exchange" (Articles 33–35)'

- **Chapter 12 – Article 36:** On those who are in and under authority in this life
  D Francois Muller: 'Belgic Confession Article 36: On those who are in and under authority in this life: Citizens obeying the civil rulers obeying God'

- **Chapter 13 – Article 37:** The final things
  A Huijgen: 'To declare himself the judge: The last judgement (Article 37)'

Since this book is the product of the contributions of several authors, all writing from a broadly Reformed perspective, it resembles a Reformed anthology rather than a finely integrated, singular view. Each author has been given the freedom to focus on the issues they regard as relevant to topic of the book.

■ The text of the Belgic Confession

It has been previously indicated that a number of changes have been made to the Belgic Confession. These changes can be divided into those made up to and at the 1618–1619 Synod of Dort and those made since then. Vonk (1956, pp. 649–656) provides a thorough critical overview of the changes made to the text up to its acceptance at this synod.

As indicated above, most of these were made for the sake of clarity. The significant changes will be dealt with in the chapters discussing the individual articles.

Two of these changes that can be highlighted at this point are changes that were made (and that will be discussed in depth later) to Articles 36 and 37. Article 36 would later become a bone of contention in several churches. Vonk argues that the root of this lies in a change that was made in 1566 by the Synod of Antwerp. Their attempt to avoid giving the wrong impression created problems of its own that would avenge itself in the 1905 decision to omit a controversial phrase from Article 36.

The other change that should be highlighted, and which is in a sense linked to the one just mentioned, was that Article 36 originally started with: 'We in closing believe […]' [Dutch: *ten slotte*; French: *finalement*]. At that stage, Article 37, the final article, started with 'We also believe […]' (cf. Vonk 1956, p. 549). This has, however, been changed so that Article 36 now starts as the previous article does, with only: 'We believe […]', and only Article 37 starts out with: 'We finally believe […]' This change will be discussed in more depth in the relevant chapters, but by 'fixing the error' in the penultimate article, the clear link between the penultimate and final articles has been lost. This not only later impacted the understanding of the meaning of Article 36, but it also robbed the confession of a double conclusionary plea initially addressed to the earthly and then finally to the heavenly authority. In light of the fact that the confession was used as a plea towards the Roman Catholic authorities of the day, and in an attempt to distance the Reformed Christians from the Anabaptists before these authorities, this change is significant. As stated, the controversial changes to Article 36 that have been made since 1905 will be discussed in depth in the relevant chapter.

After some revisions to the 1612 (*Harmonia Confessionum*) version of the text (cf. Biesterveld 1912, p. 22), the final versions of the French and Dutch texts were presented to the synod by 30 April and accepted by the synod on 24 May. The Latin version, which was ironically used as the source text from several translations, was not formally accepted by the synod. After accepting the French and Dutch texts, the synod asked Festus Hommius, one of the two scribes, to create a Latin translation using the accepted texts.

The significance of the synod's acceptance of the Belgic Confession is that this meant that the confession that was already widely accepted now became an 'official' confession of all the Reformed churches in the 'nether lands'. In due course it would become one of the 'three forms of unity' – a term incidentally only coined in the late 1800s by Abraham Kuyper.

Before turning the focus to how the Belgic Confession compared to other confessions, a remark needs to be made on modern translations of the Belgic Confession. While much attention has been paid to the (modernised) Dutch and accompanying Afrikaans versions, very little attention has been paid to creating a standard English text. Churches, such as those of Dutch descent but who in time began to use English instead, have often developed their own translations without necessarily consulting other churches. The effect of this is that there is no standard English translation that is accepted across the world – irrespective of the changes that some churches have made, for example, to Article 36 after 1905.

■ The Belgic Confession as compared to other confessions

As previously stated, Cloete (1986, p. 159) concluded that the Belgic Confession is thematically 'more or less in the middle' and does not contain radical or unique content. For another extensive comparison of the Belgic Confession to the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Canons of Dort (1618–1619), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) and the Westminster Larger Catechism (1648), the excellent publication *Reformed Confessions Harmonized: With an annotated bibliography of Reformed doctrinal works*, edited by Joel Beeke and Sinclair Ferguson, can be consulted.

As stated above, a comparison with the French Confession (*Confessio Gallicana*), on which it was modelled, is applicable at this point. Schulze calls the Belgic and French Confessions twins. Strauss (1993, p. 506) points to a number of similarities. The first articles have nearly the same wording. Article 2 of the Belgic Confession has been taken over from the French. The belief about Scripture (Belgic Confession, Art. 3–7) is stated with equal strength – the only difference being that Article 6 of the Belgic Confession contains a complete list of the apocryphal writings. While there are smaller differences (e.g. Art. 16, 33, 37), this is not significant. Both the Belgic and French Confessions also follow the same structure as the final edition of Calvin's *Institutes*, which, as has been indicated, follows the Apostles' Creed. Strauss also points out that that De Brès in Articles 19 (on the two natures of Christ) and 35 (on Holy Communion) openly sides with Calvin rather than Luther. Concerning civil government, Article 36 of the Belgic Confession follows Calvin's *Institutes*, rather than the French Confession (cf. Hartvelt 1991, p. 342). Even though Strauss indicates to what extent De Brès followed the French Confession, he is of the opinion that De Brès did not follow Calvin slavishly and that he stated his own beliefs – especially where it concerned the Anabaptists.

The Synod of Emden (1571) decided that both the French and Belgic Confessions are true to Scripture and signed both (Doekes 1975, p. 52). It can be stated that De Brès's views were fundamentally in line with the theology of the Reformation.

■ The present-day use of confessions of faith such as the Belgic Confession

The status of the confessions, even within Reformed circles, has often been under discussion and has even led to schisms. Although a list of churches that formally subscribe to the Belgic Confession has been provided above as an indication of the significance of this confession, this does not mean that all churches attach the same value to the historical confessions. This may also differ from local church to local church within the same 'denomination'. It may also differ in terms of time, where the same (local) church will at times attach more value to a confession than at other times.

It is also interesting that while doing Internet searches of several churches' 'official' websites, it became apparent that some churches which are known to subscribe to, for example, the three forms of unity will state that expressly. Several even provide copies. Some churches will only mention their confessional documents in passing, and some are known to subscribe to certain confessions that do not provide any such indication – even on an extensive website. It is telling, however, that many of these websites will display the mission and vision of the particular church but not its forms or confession.

Additionally, churches that subscribe to confessions mostly do so according to two viewpoints. Some churches subscribe to their confessions because [*quia*] they believe the content aligns with what is revealed through Scripture. Other churches subscribe to the content of their confessional documents, but only in as far as [*quatenus*] that content agrees with Scripture. While both groups may therefore subscribe to the same confession, such as the Belgic Confession, each attaches a different value to what is confessed. With this in mind, one will need to do a case-by-case study to accurately determine the value that churches, even those which formally accept confessions, attach to these confessions in actual fact. Since churches are dynamic and change from time to time, even such a study can only indicate the status at a certain point in time – a snapshot of reality.

■ Conclusion

While the following chapters will be dealing with the specific articles of the Belgic Confession and their content, this chapter has dealt with most of the formal aspects of the Belgic Confession as such.

Attention has been paid to the religious and sociopolitical contexts within which the confession was born in 1561 and was eventually formally accepted not only in the Netherlands at the Synod of Dort (1618–19) but eventually in countries spanning the globe. Therefore, a survey of the churches that currently accept the confession has also been provided.

Attention was also paid to Guido de Brès as primary author, his life, his ministry and his original intension in drafting this confession, namely to cautiously distinguish the Reformed faith from the Roman Catholics while distancing the Reformed from the Anabaptists, on whose account many Reformed Christians were persecuted.

The final third of the chapter focused on the structure of the confession, the text itself and how the confession compares to other Protestant confessions. The chapter concluded with reflection on the current use of confessions like the Belgic Confession.

It is therefore the hope of the authors of this book that by highlighting the historic meaning of the Belgic Confession and how its content can be applied currently, the current value and relevance of the Belgic Confession will be apparent once again.

Chapter 2

Belgic Confession Article 1: The only God

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We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God – eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good (eds. Pelikan & Hotchkiss 2003, p. 407).

■ Introduction

The first copies of the Belgic Confession originated in 1561. In 1566, it was revised at the Synod of Antwerp, and several misprints from the first edition were corrected. Three changes were made concerning the first article (Gootjes 2007):

> In the first edition, a comma was mistakenly placed. God was described as 'a single and simple being, spiritual […]'. In the revision, the comma was removed. The adjective 'spiritual' was connected with the noun 'being': 'a single and simple spiritual being which we call God'. It is obviously a clearer statement.

> A more idiomatic style throughout replaced the Latin sentence structure of the first edition throughout the text. It is evident in the first article. 'We believe […] there to be a single and simple being' was changed to: 'We believe […] that there is a single and simple being'.

> The closing statement of Article 1, namely that God is an 'overflowing fountain of all good' was added. (pp. 120–122)

The next and final revision of the first article took place at the Synod of Dort, 1618–1619. It was the first national synod of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands since 1586 and of great significance as far as the Belgic Confession is concerned. Within years after his appointment as professor of theology at the University of Leiden, it became apparent that Jacob Arminius's teachings deviated from many of the doctrines adopted by the Reformed churches. He stated openly that he rejected several of these doctrines. Although he died in 1609, ten years before the convention of the Synod of Dort, his influence resulted in a situation where, in many regions in the country, subscription to the confession by the ministers was either neglected or even refused. The convention of the Synod of Dort was ultimately a result of the lack of doctrinal unity in the church, as expressed in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism.

Two days after the constitution of the Synod, the Remonstrants' leaders (as Arminius's followers had become known) were requested to present their objections to the Reformed doctrine as summarised in the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. On 21 December 1618, they presented their remarks on the Belgic Confession. The response to their submission, in which they formulated their objections, was not positive at all. Gootjes (2007) presents the following translation from the Latin of their objection to the first article of the Belgic Confession.

> We want to be considered whether this is not an incomplete enumeration of the divine attributes, since some attributes are not listed while the knowledge of these is extremely necessary, since they are the basis of faith, love, hope, trust and fear of God, for example, omnipotence, mercy, severity, anger, hatred etc. (p. 143)

He rightly points out that at that time, the article did not provide a complete list of God's attributes, yet their objections were not in any way related to the doctrinal issues debated between the Reformed and the Remonstrants, that is, predestination, free will, grace and so on.

After the finalisation of the Canons of Dort, the synod dealt with the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. All the delegates were requested to freely mention any point regarding the doctrines of these two confessions that may disagree with biblical truth or the other Reformed confessions. Notwithstanding the objections of the Remonstrants and some questions and remarks, especially from the British delegates, concerning, *inter alia*, church governance, all the delegates found the two confessions in agreement with God's Word. The Bremen delegates proposed that God's omnipotence be added to the attributes in Article 1. The synod decided not to close the synod before the revision of the text of the Belgic Confession had been finalised.

Concerning Article 1, the remarks of the Remonstrants regarding God's attributes were considered. Presumably, because God's omnipotence was not mentioned in any other article in the confession, the synod decided to add 'almighty' (Gootjes 2007, p. 153). It is noteworthy, however, that the reference to the omnipotence which was already found in the French Confession, '*qui peut toutes choses*' [who can all things], was omitted in the first place (Beck 2016, p. 26). The approved revisions of the Dutch and French texts of the Belgic Confession were published in 1619.

■ The relationship of Article 1 to similar statements in other major confessions

By 1561, the creation of a creed was not a new phenomenon. Several creeds had already been published in the circles of Martin Luther and Huldrychz Zwingli. In fact, more than 60 such documents were produced during the 16th century, and according to Beeke and Smalley (2019, p. 105), the Belgic Confession counts among the seven most influential. The high degree of consistency between these confessions can be ascribed to the fact that many theologians actively travelled between Reformed centres of Europe and corresponded with each other in Latin, the language most familiar to the scholars of the time (see Sell 2008, p. 151). This is quite apparent in the first article of the Belgic Confession. Several well-known confessions of the time will be considered in the following sections.

■ The Augsburg Confession [*Confessio Augustana*] (1530)

This confession was presented to Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg by the Protestant territories of northern Germany. The articles attempt to demonstrate that the Protestant faith aligns with the ancient Church (Schaff 1877):

> The churches with common consent among us, do teach that the decree of the Nicene Synod concerning the Unity of the Divine Essence and of the Three Persons is true, and without doubt to be believed: to wit, that there is one Divine Essence which is called and which is God, eternal, without body, indivisible (without part), of infinite power, wisdom, goodness, the Creator and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible [...]. (p. 7)

■ The French Confession [*Confessio Fidei Gallicana*] (1559)

The Belgic Confession is often called 'the daughter of the French or Gallican Confession' because Guido de Brès used the latter as the pattern for his document, concerning its organisation and teachings. Apart from the striking

resemblance regarding the preamble, it is evident that the Belgic Confession takes its starting point in the French Confession by using 'we', 'believe' and 'confess'. There are also remarkable similarities in this regard with Theodore Beza's confession of 1559.[30] However, continuing the tradition, it can be stated that De Brès did not simply repeat it (Gootjes 2007, pp. 62–67, 78). The first article of the French Confession is as follows (Schaff 1977):

> We believe and confess that there is but one God, who is one sole and simple essence, spiritual, eternal, invisible, immutable, infinite, incomprehensible, ineffable, omnipotent; who is all-wise, all-good, all-just, and all-merciful. (pp. 359–360)

■ The Scots Confession of Faith (1560)

This confession was written by John Knox and five other theologians in 1560 at the conclusion of the Scottish Civil War. It was approved by the Reformation Parliament and the Church of Scotland, attaining full legal status with the abdication of Mary Stuart – Mary, Queen of Scots – in 1567. Chapter 1 begins as follows (Schaff 1977):

> We confesse and acknawledge ane onelie God, to whom only we must cleave, whom onelie we must serve, whom onelie we must worship, and in whom onelie we must put our trust. Who is Eternall, Infinit, Unmeasurable, Incomprehensible, Omnipotent, Invisible [...]. (p. 439)

■ The Westminster Confession of Faith (1659)

The Westminster Confession was formulated at the Westminster Assembly of Divines (1643–1648). This assembly of mostly Puritan ministers and laymen met during the English Civil War to advise Parliament about the 'further reformation' of the Church of England. It presented a powerful summary of contemporary Reformed views and significantly influenced worldwide Presbyterianism. The first chapter of the confession was on the Holy Scripture, and the second chapter was on God and the Holy Trinity. The first paragraph of the second chapter is of interest here (Schaff 1977):

> There is but one only, living, and true God: who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty. (pp. 606–607)

30. The first chapter of Beza's confession is titled 'Of the Trinity'. The first article of this chapter, however, begins with: 'We believe that there is one only divine substance which we call God [...]'. God's attributes are not dealt with separately (ed. Dennison 2010, p. 239).

■ 'We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths …'

Historically speaking, the first three words of the Belgic Confession signify the very first banner of biblical truth under which the church of the Reformation in the Netherlands presented itself in the ecclesiastical and political world. Born in an era of strife, the Belgic Confession was an apologetic document. It signifies a distancing from the Anabaptists who attracted unwanted attention from the government with their unruly behaviour and civil disobedience in the Netherlands based on their belief that a Christian is a citizen of a higher realm and, as such, not subject to the authority of an earthly ruler (Cloete 1986, pp. 83, 89). In 1561, the Netherlands was still part of the Spanish kingdom, and in the introductory letter to the creed, De Brès addressed King Philip II of Spain (1556–1598), who was, as a Roman Catholic potentate, aggressively opposed to the Protestants. The civil unrest provoked by the Anabaptists did not help the cause of the Reformed believers, who strived to live in peace with the ruler of the day.

De Brès also wanted to persuade King Philip II that the Reformed believers in the region were not heretics. Already in the first article of the Belgic Confession, the characterisation of God includes a standard list of attributes that can be traced back through the Middle Ages to the patristic period. It reflects the Catholic tradition, such as Irenaeus, Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Duns Scotus. De Brès had, in any case, a thorough knowledge of the patristics (see Dreyer 1997, p. 1261).

Medieval theology had debated and examined God's existence, essence and attributes along many routes, and Augustine's influence was nearly always present. Philosophical and theological debates were characterised by topics such as the purpose and place of intellectual arguments for God's existence, the essence and perfections of God, the relationship between human language on the one hand and creaturely being on the other hand, and so on (see eds. Smith & Kemeny 2019, p. 294). Taken together with the doctrine of the Trinity (Art. 8, 9), it is clear that the doctrine of the Belgic Confession, from the very first article, distances itself from the major heresies of the past and affirms its agreement with the three ecumenical creeds of the ancient church (Bierma & Sinnema 2020, p. 240).

The 'we' suggests a body of believers gathered to unity by Jesus Christ through his Word and Spirit as generally understood by the Reformers and formulated in Article 27 of the Belgic Confession as follows: 'a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers'.

Although Article 1 is in line with the Catholic faith, as mentioned, the Belgic Confession, like so many other confessions of the time, also takes a position against false teaching and hypocrisy. The emphasis is on the 'true'

Christian who believes the 'truth' as revealed in the Word of God (Art. 2–7). The Protestant believer is responsible for their own faith and is no longer spiritually a prisoner at the shallow end of the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy (Bosman et al. 1987, p. 9). The Reformation left no room for what the Roman Catholics called 'a complicated faith' of the illiterate in order for the clergy to take on themselves the burden of research and knowledge. God must be known subjectively according to the consciousness of his concrete reality (Horner 2009, p. vii).

The Reformation furthermore broke away from the Roman Catholic intellectualistic view of faith. The Belgic Confession is clear on this matter: faith has everything to do with the heart. Calvin defines the knowledge of God that we should cultivate as: '[…] *non quae inani speculatione contenta in cerebro tantum volitet, sed quae solida futura sit et fructuosa, si rite percipiatur a nobis radicemque agat in corde*' (CR 2:47).[31] The expression 'knowledge of God' is therefore not merely an indication of intellectual knowledge or an acknowledgement of superior power over us. Humanity's knowledge of God and creation can never be the same as God's knowledge of himself and creation. Yet, humans can know God and creation, but in a human, limited, creaturely and not self-sufficient way. If that were not the case, humanity would not have been able to serve, honour and glorify God or fulfil their calling. Eventually, faith and revelation are the basis of all human knowledge (Stoker 1967, pp. 60–61).

Faith not confessed declines. Mouth and heart are actively involved in the life of the church. The Belgic Confession is clear on the fact that we do not only believe that there is a God, we believe *in* him. There should be a relationship with him through Jesus Christ in communion with the Holy Spirit. This should keep us from speculating on who God is. So many times in the church's history, theologians were seduced by abstract theories and intellectualistic renderings of what God might or might not be. In the light of John Calvin's conviction that our knowledge should serve first to teach us fear and reverence (*Inst*. I.2.2), Horner (2009, p. 409) rightly warns: 'to study the being of God in a detached and impersonal sense is surely to be guilty of one of the most irreverent pursuits possible'.

The composition of the Belgic Confession was an act of belief and obedience. It is, among other things, clear from the fact that 1 Peter 3:15 was printed on the title page of the very first edition of the Belgic Confession in 1561, as was the case with the French Confession: 'Always be ready to

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31. 'Not resting content with hollow speculation, which only flutters in the brain, but a knowledge which will prove solid and fruitful wherever it is duly perceived, and rooted in the heart' (*Inst*. I.5.9).

make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you'.[32]

These introductory words of the first article also suggest church unity. De Brès composed this confession in 1561 as a unifying symbol of truth among the Reformed-minded in the Netherlands and elsewhere (see Cloete 1986, p. 18). It is already suggested in the subtitle of the original French version: *d'un commun accord par les fideles* [by common consent of the faithful]. The creed was not a product of one particular group of believers or a local synod, as with the French Confession. Originally written in French as *Confession de Foy*, it was soon translated into Dutch as *Belydenisse des gheloofs* in 1562 and in Latin as *Confessio Belgica* in 1581. The latter translation, taken into consideration by the Synod of Dort in 1618 and 1619 and approved by the appointed commission of said synod intentionally before the departure of all the foreign delegates, also alludes to the ecumenical character of this creed (see Fick & Kotzee 2009).

Finally, it is also important to note that the words 'we all' reflect the Reformers' stance on individualism in general. Antithetic to the Anabaptists' tendency to individualise the Christian in society, in the church and in their relations with God, the importance of the covenant and the unity [*sacer nexus*] of the Old and New Testaments came to the fore (Balke 1977, p. 329). This is still very relevant in our individualistic age that has shaped people to think of belief as an individual matter with the motto 'I have learned to think for myself'. The church has to emphasise persistently that the Christian is a person only in the community of the church (Janssen 2016, p. 23).

■ '… that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God …'

Van der Walt (2008, p. 70) points to a strange phenomenon in today's Western world. On the one hand, there is less or no god (he has been declared dead), and on the other hand, more god, or everything is god: god in nature, oneself, one's fellow human beings and other religions. The Belgic Confession, however, makes a clear declaration: there is one only God. This declaration is based on God's revelation, as Articles 2–7 affirm. He is not a distant, hidden, silent God. This opposes agnosticism, which claims that we do not, or cannot, know that there is a God. It also opposes scepticism, which doubts our ability to know anything, and relativism, which claims that there is no absolute truth. It finally opposes atheism.

32. It also alludes to Romans 10:8–10 and Deuteronomy 30:11. All biblical quotes in this chapter are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

To say that there is no God is abnormal and wicked, for the fool says in his heart: 'There is no God' (Ps 14:1). Atheistic rejection of God leads ultimately to the deification of man.

The major parts of the orthodox doctrine of God are the nature and attributes of God on the one hand and the distinguished persons of God on the other. These two parts evidently suppose that God exists. It is a faith-based supposition, for God's existence cannot be proved. The so-called proofs of God's existence eventually refer to something within created reality without ever reaching the true God (Van der Walt 2008, p. 368). Unless God is, there would not be any attributes of or persons in God. Accordingly, the Reformed orthodox doctrine of God is most clearly divided into three parts: the existence of God, the nature and attributes of God and the three persons of God (see Rehnman 2013, p. 354).

Questions concerning God are of major significance and usually a 'problematic part' of Christian doctrine. Therefore, Te Velde (2010, p. 1) finds it rightly surprising that it is not the most debated topic of systematic theology. After all, the Reformed doctrine of God differs considerably from the confessions of other Christian groups because it persistently applies the doctrine of God to all other doctrines (see Sproul 2005, p. 26).

It should always be kept in mind that the Bible never operates with an abstract concept of God or an amorphous 'higher power' but describes him as the living God who enters into various personal covenantal relations with his creatures. These relations are indicative of several different attributes. He always acts for his people's benefit (see Berkhof 1949, p. 22; Sproul 2005, p. 102). It is in glaring contrast to naturalists who believe that nature is all that there is, that it is the ultimate reality and that nothing beyond nature has any influence or effect on it. Either there is no God or God does not affect nature. Only the biblical view of God gives a sufficient explanation of life in the world.

■ '… that there is a *single* and simple spiritual being, whom we call God …'

Firstly, the Belgic Confession deals with the uniqueness of God. This is a characteristic theme throughout the Bible. God made it very clear through Moses: '[…] the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other' (Dt 4:39).[33] After they emerged from the desert, the Israelites did not only attack the Canaanites but also their deities, and God instructed them to remain free from the cult of alien gods.

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33. See also Deuteronomy 6:4 and Isaiah 44:6.

God is also called 'the only true God' (Jn 17:3) and 'the […] eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God' (1 Tm 1:17). In the book of Acts, however, several references to Paul's encounters with the worship of gods and goddesses from Greek and oriental paganism are to be found.[34] This phenomenon was prevalent throughout the ages. Pagan gods and animistic resident spirits are personifications of immanent, inner-worldly forces, while the biblical God is not anywhere in created reality. He transcends his creation and earthly time. He exists beyond our sphere of reality and existence and is the ultimate cause and maker of everything. As such, biblical monotheism categorically excludes polytheism, tritheism, dualism[35] and pantheism.

■ '… that there is a single and *simple* spiritual being, whom we call God …'

Church fathers such as Irenaeus, Athanasius and Augustine frequently spoke of the simplicity of God. In this way, they placed the living God over and against the gods of paganism and the gnostic conceptions of God. Anselm, Thomas Aquinas and Zanchius had a more abstract and speculative conception of the doctrine of divine simplicity: they thought of it as a logical determination or characterisation of God's unique mode of existence, particularly the absolute independence [*aseitas*] and transcendence of God. He is in no sense correlative to or dependent upon anything besides his own being. Caution is called for in this case, however. One can easily fall into theories about God rather than focusing on the knowledge and worship of God (see Van Genderen & Velema 2008, p. 172).

The word 'single' in conjunction with 'simple' can also be understood in that it indicates oneness as opposed to division or unity of simplicity. It means that God's being is not divisible into parts; he is not partly this and partly that but one in himself – the same in all his ways and works. Each of God's attributes implies and includes all the others. What is ruled out by the term *simplicitas* is the idea that he would be composed of several entities, as this is characteristic of creatures. He is free of all composition. The attributes of God are also not characteristics that God has developed gradually. They are fundamental to his being.

There is no real distinction 'between God's being and his attributes or between the attributes mutually' as if the being and attributes were different 'things' or 'substances' (Te Velde 2010, p. 112). 'God does not only have properties such as life, light and love, but he is life, light, love himself.

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34. See Acts 13:6, 14:11–15, 17:22–23, 19:23–40, 28:11, and so on.

35. There are no rival, competing, distinct powers, such as light and darkness, good and evil, spirit and matter, within God (see Horner 2009, p. 309).

He receives these properties not from the outside, but by and from himself' (Te Velde 2010, p. 121).

His attributes are therefore not in conflict with each other. It becomes apparent, for instance, in Articles 16 and 20 of the Belgic Confession, where his justice and mercy in election and salvation through Christ are confessed in harmony.

God's simplicity and his spirituality are the basis of the first two of the Ten Commandments. The first rests upon his simplicity and the second upon his spirituality. It is clear how the Heidelberg Catechism (Question & Answer [QA] 94–98) expounds the first two commandments (Te Velde 2010):

> [*A serious*] question that can be posed to the doctrine of simplicity is how it relates to the doctrine of the Trinity. Is not the existence of three Persons in God a form of composition? The Reformed orthodox writers are unanimous in their denial: the Persons do not compose, but only distinguish (*personae non componunt, sed distinguunt*). (p. 126)

Holmes (2012, p. 47) quotes Isaak Dorner, who gives a very clear perspective on this matter: 'Just as God must be Trinitarian in all His attributes, so also by means of the Trinity the divine attributes first harmoniously coalesce into Unity'.

Stewart (s.a.) exposes a very popular error:

> [*Which*] is contradicted by the doctrine of God's simplicity, especially the truth that the attributes of God qualify each other. The free [...] offer [*of salvation to all, which became popular in current evangelism endeavours, claims*] that God loves [*everyone, even*] the reprobate, and desires to save them. [*It*] presents God as if He loves the [*entire*] reprobate throughout their lifetimes but, when they die, He stops loving them and punishes them forever in hell. This view [*suggests*] a temporary divine love [...] God's simplicity, [*however,*] means that all the attributes of God qualify each other [...] [*God, being one,*] has only one love – a holy, omnipotent love in perfect conformity with His own blessed being [...] A love of God for those who are not His own in Jesus Christ would be a love that is not infinite [...] If that love of God changes into hatred when the person dies, then [*his*] love would also be temporal [...]. We [...] [*often*] have conflict within ourselves: we want to do one thing and we also want to do something that is incompatible with the first [...] This is because we are sinful creatures and not simple like God, who is absolutely one in His Being, mind and will. He does not have any division or conflict [*in himself*]. (n.p.)

■ '... that there is a single and simple *spiritual* being, whom we call God ...'

'God is spirit' (Jn 4:24) is the classic biblical definition of the nature of God and is traditionally interpreted as incorporeal or immaterial. It excludes any material images or corporeal representations of God. He is

not an exalted human being. No human has seen or can see him. There is an essential distinction between God and his creature. God would be entirely incomprehensible if he did not reveal himself in Scripture and in Jesus Christ. All the anthropomorphisms we find in Scripture are God's way to accommodate our '*tenuitas*' [feebleness] as Calvin (CR 2:90, *Inst*. I.13.1) called it. 'God is Spirit', however, does not mean that God is a Spirit, for that would assign a categorical significance to the Greek word *pneuma*. Jesus' words in John 4:24 are qualifying, not categorising. The biblical idea that the Spirit gives life should be kept in mind (Van Genderen & Velema 2008, p. 174). The distinction between the Old and New Covenants should also be considered here. In the Old Covenant, the worship of God was connected to tangible and visible realities where the tabernacle and the service played important roles. In the case of the Samaritans, it was a particular mountain. Christ, however, announced that this kind of worship had been fulfilled. God is now worshipped spiritually, following his nature (Polman 1948, p. 130). Stewart (s.a.) further claims:

> The truth of God's spirituality is necessary for His simplicity. If God were material or non-spiritual, He could not be simple [...] Clearly, that which is material cannot be simple [...] Moreover, since God is omnipresent, He cannot be material, for this would make Him visible and He would occupy the space of the entire universe! [*In this sense*,] the spirituality of God and His simplicity go hand in hand, and His spirituality is necessary for His invisibility and omnipresence. (n.p.)

Naudé (2004, pp. 92–95) aptly describes the liturgical manifestation of modern endeavours to make God more tangible. The spiritual danger manifests itself in church services where humans, their needs, their hunger for experience and the phenomenon of consumerism and prosperity become the starting point and final objective. It is a manifestation of a move from God to the self as the principal focus of faith and, as such, the dominant motif of humanism. Therefore, some sort of account of divine attributes is fundamental, not just to theology but to Christian devotion. In this regard, Horner (2009) rightly remarks:

> Nothing compares with a humble, simple encounter with the grandeur and grace of God, the contemplation and trembling adoration of He who needs no embellishment due to the demands of contemporary relevance. (p. xii)

Holmes (2012, p. 48) also agrees: 'Hymnody and liturgy, echoing biblical material, [*should*] celebrate divine attributes in praise and prayers'.

■ '… that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call *God* …'

It is necessary for a Christian, when speaking to others about God, to have a word to indicate who he is. However, the purpose is not to distinguish him

from other gods, for there is only one God (see Rehnman 2013). John Calvin is clear on this matter:

> [N]empe quum profitemur nos credere in unum Deum, sub Dei nomine, intelligi unicam et simplicem essentiam, in qua comprehendimus tres personas vel hypostaseis: ideoque quoties Dei nomen indefinite ponitur, non minus filium et spiritum, quam patrem designari. (CR 2:106)[36]

From Galatians 4:8, it is also clear that God has a definite nature [*phusis*] and that nature is divine [*theios*]. His divine nature is known through the Lord Jesus Christ, who dwells in the fullness of the 'Godhead'. God revealed the knowledge of his nature in order to save sinners and draw them to him through Jesus Christ.

■ '… eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good …'

The discussion of the attributes of God, in most cases, forms the largest part of the total doctrine of God. Reformed theology usually emphasises that the word 'attributes' should be understood correctly, namely as essential properties [*proprietates essentiales*] that are closely and permanently associated with him. It should not be interpreted as specifying qualities [*accidentia*] in addition to the essence of God. God has no accidental qualities. All of his attributes are essential, and he cannot cease to possess any of his attributes without ceasing to be God.

All of his attributes describe his essence and how he acts towards creation. 'God does what he does because he is what he is' (Beeke & Smalley 2019, p. 542). All three persons of the Triune God, therefore, have the same attributes. In addition to 'attributes', some authors speak of God's 'perfections', '[infinite, essential] excellences',[37] 'virtues' or 'properties'.

The first article of the Belgic Confession has often been criticised because the list of attributes can also be found in some scholastic systems. Some theologians even criticise it by arguing that Greek philosophical notions corrupt it (Beeke & Smalley 2019, pp. 537–539). Even John Calvin, whose influence on the confession in general – and the first article in

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36. 'When we confess to believe in one God, by the name God is understood the one simple essence, understanding three persons or hypostases; and, hence, whenever the name of God is used indefinitely, the Son and Spirit, not less than the Father, is meant' (*Inst.* I.13.20). See also Genesis 32:29 and Exodus 3:14.

37. See 1 Peter 2:9 and 2 Peter 1:3.

particular – is widely acknowledged,[38] is accused of Neoplatonism (see Helm 2004, p. 1). Calvin was, however, legendarily critical of speculation, persistently stressing the limitations of human capacity[39] and reluctant to engage in the lengthy academic debate on the divine essence and attributes (see eds. Smith & Kemeny 2019, p. 295).

Polman (1948, pp. 115–119) and Beck (2016, pp. 26, 27) also show convincingly that the criticism of scholasticism is based on the misunderstanding that the first article of the Belgic Confession is an endeavour to render an abstract conceptualisation of who God is, as Thomas Aquinas, for instance, tried to do. It is rather an expression of faith within a specific historical context and part of a doctrinal tradition.

It is, however, difficult to speak of the character of God and, therefore, challenging to speak of his attributes. It may simply attribute certain characteristics to God and destroy his unity. It is therefore important to remember that God is as he reveals himself. Nowhere does Scripture discuss God's being apart from his attributes. His attributes are his being. However, the first article of the Belgic Confession was never meant to be a definition of God, for humanity cannot discover God by means of their polluted, subjective, limited faculties. The infinite cannot be confined by the finite. He dwells in unapproachable light. It can only be demonstrated that God is, but not why or what God is (Rehnman 2013, p. 370). It is therefore appropriate to say that 'the creeds and confessions of the church are repositories of astonishment' when speaking of God and that they accordingly have a doxological character (Janssen 2016, p. 9).

The attributes of God have been systematised in quite a number of ways. There are the incommunicable attributes, and there are the communicable attributes, which human beings, to some degree,[40] share. Other theologians defined the attributes in terms of what God is not and what he positively is. Karl Barth (2004, pp. 322–350) has organised the attributes under the perfections of divine loving and the divine freedom.

◼ God is eternal

Firstly, it is important to remember that God's attributes are eternal and infinite in him. His eternity means that 'he has not become what he is and will never cease to be what he is' (Van Genderen & Velema 2008, p. 174).

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38. For Calvin's influence on the Belgic Confession, see Dreyer (1997, p. 1217) and Heron (2014, p. 2).

39. See, for instance, his *Institutes* I.13.21.

40. It is important that we should admit that even the communicable attributes of God in an absolute sense are just as incommunicable as the others. Humanity is exceedingly unlike God and falls infinitely short of him (see Beeke & Smalley 2019, p. 542).

He did not make himself. Because of his self-existence and independence (aseity), he is without origin and end, grounded upon himself and nothing else. He is eternal and never changes. He is the fountain and origin of life. It also means that he is elevated beyond all changes of time, for time is created. His eternity is an eternal present; he can see time in its entirety, namely, our past, present and future.

God's eternity, contrary to deism, is qualitative and not simply quantitatively an endless extension of time. The error of pantheism (which negates God's transcendence in favour of his immanence), which simply considers eternity as the substance of time itself, should also be avoided. Eternity excludes succession of moments. Time is the mode of existence of all finite creatures. On the other hand, God is the eternal I AM, without beginning or end, and not subject to measuring or counting in his duration. He made time serviceable to eternity by establishing an eternal covenant of grace with his people, which his Son ratified through his life and through his death on the cross in time. He prepared it such that our lives in time attain meaning for eternity. His children receive eternal salvation, eternal life and eternal glory through grace (Feenstra 1981, p. 25).

■ God is incomprehensible

> Essentia quidem eius incomprehensibilis est, ut sensus omnes humanos procul effugiat eius numen; verum singulis operibus suis certas gloriae suae notas insculpsit, et quidem adeo claras et insignes ut sublata sit quamlibet rudibus et stupidis ignorantiae excusatio. (Calvin CR 2:41)[41]

God is as he reveals himself in his Word and in his creation (see Art. 2 of the Belgic Confession), but he is never confined in his revelation. He makes himself known to his people, but he is never an object for us to observe, study, analyse, manipulate or control. He is beyond our understanding and our highest thoughts; to fully understand him, we would have to be God ourselves. As Augustine famously said: '*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*'[42] (Migne 38:663).

The Scriptures disclose awareness of God's incomprehensibility through repeated emphasis on his holiness, transcendence and sovereignty. It does not mean that we cannot have any real knowledge of him whom Karl Barth describes as the 'Wholly Other', as if God is so different from us that he remains hidden even in his revelation. In this regard, one should remember

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41. 'His essence, indeed, is so incomprehensible, that the idea thereof completely transcends all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is sculptured in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and uneducated, can plead ignorance as their excuse' (*Institutes*, I.5.1).

42. 'If you understand, it isn't God' (Sermon 117:5).

that Jesus spoke of our eternal life through knowing the true God (Jn 17:3). The fact that God reveals himself to us does not remove his incomprehensibility but draws our attention to it. That is not, however, at the cost of knowing him, but it leads us to know him as the One we will never fully understand yet who graciously speaks to us (Van de Beek 2003, p. 578). Feenstra (1981, p. 19) rightly distinguishes between the unknowableness and the incomprehensibility of God. Incomprehensible does not mean God cannot be known, but we can never comprehend and fathom him completely.

The doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God calls attention to the distance between the divine Creator and his mortal creatures. One should therefore speak properly but not carelessly of God. The debate on the language to be used when speaking of God is ongoing, but it is foolish to want more than God has revealed.

■ God is invisible

'God's incorporeality […] leads to his invisibility' because 'only material bodies can be seen' (Te Velde 2010, p. 124). Paul calls God 'invisible' in 1 Timothy 1:17, indicating that it is not humanity's task to research what is hidden in God (Te Velde 2010):

> The doctrine of the invisibility of [*God*] leads to the doctrine of incomprehensibility […] [*It is*] not only […] impossible to see God with corporeal eyes; it is even impossible for the human mind to know his essence directly. (p. 125)

An important 'theme in Reformed orthodox theology is the [*so-called*] *visio Dei* […] [*A*] distinction between knowledge of vision, of union and of revelation is […] common' (Te Velde 2010, p. 124). Four forms of 'seeing God' are distinguished: in the incarnation, God became 'visible' in his Son; theophanies in which God made himself somehow 'visible'; reception of true knowledge by God's revelation; and, after the Last Day, the direct vision of God's glory, though not his own inner essence (see Te Velde 2010, p. 124).

■ God is unchangeable

God's immutability arises from other attributes, especially his self-existence, simplicity, spirituality and eternity. He is unchanging in all his attributes, essence, character, will, purpose, consciousness, promises, decrees and covenants. He is and remains the same through time and circumstances, because in Christ, he upholds all things by the word of his power. It should, however, not be confused with monotonous sameness or rigid immobility. Immutability does not mean immobility, for God acts in history. His immutability is dynamic, not static. He is involved in all that happens.

The classical scriptural proof for the *immutabilitas Dei* is 1 Samuel 15:29: '[…] the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind'. An important statement in Scripture in this regard is the following: 'I am who I am' (Ex 3:14), which indicates One who remains constant because he is independent. God does not and cannot change,[43] as there is nothing besides his own eternal being on which he depends, in contrast with the passing and decline of everything else. The image of the rock is also frequently used in Scripture to describe this attribute of God. Even when the Bible says that God 'changed his mind' or that he 'regrets what he has done', it should be understood in the following way: God alters the revelation of himself without modifying himself ontologically (Dolezal 2017, p. 15). It is often objected that God must be changeable, otherwise, he could not answer prayer. Nowhere in the Bible, however, are the children of God encouraged to pray that God would change his will.[44] Prayer is not a means of getting human beings' will done in Heaven but a means of God getting his will done on Earth.

Recently, the orthodox understandings of who God is have been under severe attack and have been caricatured to alter the traditional beliefs of God's divine essence and attributes. There are, even in the world of evangelical theology and within modern Calvinism, serious attempts to replace them with a belief in a temporal deity whose oneness is just social. God is argued to take on new temporal attributes, and the Creator–creature relationship is described in panentheistic terms. The strength of panentheism (also known as bipolar theism or process theology)[45] in all its forms is indeed its emphasis upon God's immanence in the world (Ac 17:28). However, they also expose its fatal flaw, namely their idea that the world is God's body, an essential part of his existence. They also argue that divine immutability suggests imperfection in God. According to their argument, the ability to change is better than being unable to change. These views fail upon the very first verse of the Bible (Beeke & Smalley 2019, p. 597).

Pantheism is still prevalent in modern religions and popular forms of what is generally called 'spirituality'. It identifies God with nature or regards the universe as a manifestation of God and argues that God can change because he is one with creation, which, of course, contradicts the Bible. God does not become; he is. There is no change in time in God because he is eternal, no change in space because he is omnipresent, and no change in

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43. See also James 1:17.

44. See, for instance, John 6:38; Matthew 6:10, 26:39; and John 4:34.

45. This view is represented by Alfred North Whitehead; Charles Hartshorne; Schubert Ogden; John Cobb, Jr.; Lewis Ford, and so on (see Geisler 2011, p. 9).

his being because he is pure essence (Feenstra 1981, p. 27). Dolezal (2017) is correct when he states:

> The Christian who believes that God experiences a change of any sort is no longer able to say with the older theologians, 'All that is in God is God'. He instead conceives that God's being is a mixture of divinity and the new qualities of being which have augmented His divinity. From the viewpoint of classical Christian orthodoxy, such outcomes are unacceptable, for they undermine the very absoluteness of God's life and existence and so, by extension, the believer's utter reliance upon God. (p. ii)

The unchangeability of God and of his decrees has important consequences for the true Christian faith in a world where consistency is a rare commodity. It is, in the first place, a source of comfort. God never abandons the works of his hands, which is the basis for the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Reformers like Luther and Calvin point in this regard to the pastoral implications of this creed (see Van Genderen & Velema 2008, p. 177). Luther speaks of the comfort and joy in the fact that when we change, we may seek refuge with God, who is unchangeable. According to Calvin, God's children may trust in God because: '*Neque enim simul est mortalibus, quos liberalitatis suae taedet, vel quorum exhauritur faculta*' (CR 2:652).[46] God's immutability, truthfulness and faithfulness cannot be separated from each other.

■ God is infinite

When applied to time, God's immutability is called eternity; when applied to space, it is called omnipresence. Frequently (Bavinck 2011):

> [*The*] two have been included under the umbrella term of 'divine infinity'. The term 'infinity' can be used negatively in the sense of 'endless'. [*Something*] is called endless when in fact it has no end though conceivably it could have. In philosophy, the term has often been applied to God in that sense. [*This view is untenable.*] This divine infinity is not an infinity of magnitude, for God is incorporeal and has no extension. Neither is it an infinity of number, for this would conflict with God's oneness and simplicity. [*However*], it is an 'infinity of essence'. God is infinite in his characteristic essence, perfect, infinite in an intensive, qualitative, and positive sense. (p. 187)

However, in the incarnate Son of God and his reconciling work, the finite creature and the infinite God can have personal discourse and true fellowship.

'The comprehension of God as immanent with little regard for His transcendence is associated with a variety of doctrinal errors, cults, and major world religions' (Horner s.a., n.p.). Firstly, pantheism is manifested in

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46. 'And he is not like men who get tired of their liberality, or whose means of exercising it' (*Inst*., III.20.26).

Hinduism, Buddhism and Christian Science. Secondly, classical liberalism states that God is naturally rather than supernaturally at work in the entire world. Thirdly, relational theology states that God is subjectively comprehended as the ground of all important human interpersonal relationships, especially in a utilitarian sense (Horner 2009, p. 269). There are also errors regarding the incarnation and the two natures of Christ – one finite and the other infinite (see Geisler 2011, p. 92).

In any case, when Christians confess that God is perfect and infinite Spirit and bestowed with infinite knowledge, power and mercy, there is a call to worship him immediately.

◼ God is almighty

God revealed his omnipotence in all his works, such as creation, preservation, salvation and victory over the devil and the forces of evil. We should, however, not think of God's omnipotence in terms of the superlative of our human concept of power. This would constitute power on an impressive scale but not divine power. God makes himself known as the Almighty, and a phrase frequently used in this regard in the Old and New Testaments is 'Lord of Hosts'. His omnipotence is no anonymous power and should always be seen from the perspective of his fatherhood, as suggested in the first sentence of the Apostles' Creed. His omnipotence is, therefore, always the omnipotence of his holy love. The church believes in him who is 'almighty God and […] a faithful Father' (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9, QA 26).

God's omnipotence should always be seen with his holy will, infinite wisdom, goodness and absolute sovereignty.[47] Therefore, when speaking of the fact that literally everything is possible to God, it should also be taken into account that there are some impossibilities that the Bible itself refers to. God cannot deny himself, lie or be tempted by evil.[48] He cannot do anything that is in conflict with his essence. The degree of what is possible lies in God himself.

Guthrie (1996) shows clearly how the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, especially as it is expressed in the Calvinist Reformed tradition, is being attacked from different directions today: by feminist theologians, by Latin American liberation theologians and by mainline Protestants such as

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47. The omnipotence and sovereignty of God are, for the sake of their interrelatedness, discussed under the same heading here, conscious of the fact that it is not quite synonymous. God's omnipotence is his absolute power as the Almighty, while his sovereignty is his rightful dominion over all that is undergirded by his omnipotence (see Horner 2009, pp. 180–181).

48. See 2 Timothy 2:13; Hebrews 6:18; and James 1:13.

Lutheran Douglas John Hall and Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann. He also indicates what lies behind these criticisms (Guthrie 1996):

> [*T*]he old familiar objections that this doctrine robs human beings of both freedom and responsibility and, despite all protest to the contrary, makes God responsible for evil and all the bad things that happen in our individual lives and in the world around us. (pp. 22, 23)

A common theme in these theologies is a panentheistic relation of God to the world and a strong position of God as a fellow sufferer in the pain of the oppressed.

One theological phenomenon which has serious consequences for the traditional Reformed stance on the sovereignty of God is open theism, which is, according to Pinnock (2005, p. 237), 'a version of historic free will theism which posits God as granting to human beings significant freedom to cooperate with or to resist the will of God for their lives'. He does not see open theism in quite a negative way. He argues that it is only 'a mere adjustment to standard Arminian thinking on the point of understanding the divine foreknowledge' and is convinced that it should be viewed as a legitimate option for Christian theology, even for evangelical theology. However, Piper, Taylor and Kjoss Helseth (eds. 2009, p. 9) expose the errant core of open theism correctly when they define it as the belief that humans and angels can be morally responsible only if they have ultimate autonomy, to such a degree that it rules out God's ability to render or see any of their future free acts and decisions as certain. According to open theists, most good and evil choices that humans make are unknown to God before they happen. This is, of course, a denial of God's complete, definite foreknowledge and sovereignty.[49]

Since the inerrancy debate of the 1970s, the debate over the nature and content of the foreknowledge of God has become one of the most controversial issues disputed in Reformed and evangelical circles and has direct implications for the attributes of God and specifically his omnipotence (see eds. Beilby & Eddy 2001, p. 9). It is indisputably an attempt to change the way Christians think about God. Underlying it is, sadly, an unbiblical, libertarian confidence in freedom of choice and a belief that God's power is susceptible to the tendency to oppress his subjects, portraying God as hungry for real love from his creatures. Also, their tendency to channel all of God's attributes under the attribute of love is not consistent with Scripture (see eds. Piper, Taylor & Kjoss Helseth 2009, p. 70).

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49. For a thorough, historical and biblical perspective of this issue, see RK McGregor Wright's 1996 book with the significant title, *No place for sovereignty: What's wrong with freewill theism*.

Arminianism lurks in the background and manifests itself in many forms, even in Reformed circles. It is usually clear how the unbiblical notion of the cooperative, bilateral work between God and man concerning his salvation and sanctification is preached. It is none other than a very subtle attack on the sovereignty of God (Horner 2009, p. 175).

In addition, Welker (2003, p. 6) reminds the Reformed-minded that teaching God's sovereignty and glory requires solid anchoring in the *solus Christus*. We need this anchoring 'if we do not want to block access to the theological orientation on God's revelation by replacing that orientation with speculations of a natural-theological or philosophical nature' (p. 6).

■ God is completely wise

Whereas the atonement demonstrates God's love and justice, creation demonstrates his power and wisdom. Wisdom refers to God's focused action, always choosing the right goals and the best means to those goals (Grudem 1994, p. 154). In some passages in the Bible, wisdom and the knowledge of God are mentioned in one breath. Although these two may be separated in the case of people, they are inseparable from God. His knowledge is not based on observation or interpretation because he is omniscient and surpasses our understanding (Van Genderen & Velema 2008, pp. 184–185).

God is the only wise God (Rm 16:27). He always adapts everything outside of himself to his own glory, and everything in himself serves his own infinite and perfect blessedness (Stewart s.a.). His wisdom is a continuing readiness to make decisions, and it also means that he subjects everything to his purpose. His all-wisdom ensures that he will choose the wisest means to accomplish his ends. His wisdom and sovereignty, therefore, cannot be separated. Sovereignty is not only the capacity to do everything he wills but also to do it in the best way possible.

For those who come to Christ and his Word, the treasure room of divine wisdom is opened, for the pinnacle of the revelation of the wisdom of God is redemption in Christ, who is called 'the power of God, and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1:24). God's wisdom is, in part, communicable to his children. He promises: 'if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him' (Ja 1:5).

■ God is just

In theology, the righteousness of God has frequently been clouded by a philosophical and even jurisprudential understanding of the word.

Thomas Aquinas, for instance, said that God's justice could be recognised from the fact that he gives everyone what they deserve (see Van Genderen & Velema 2008, p. 185).

However, God's righteousness cannot be understood correctly outside of the framework of his covenant. He is called just regarding his promises but also in relationship to his demands. His covenant was fulfilled with the coming of the Messiah, who established and sustained his kingdom with justice and righteousness (Is 9:7). It is, therefore important to see God's justice in a soteriological light. Augustine and the Reformers emphasised the fact that God clothes his people with his righteousness, manifested in Christ's death and resurrection. This does not, however, exclude wrath and anger, keeping in mind his covenantal promises of blessedness and punishment. God is eternally in perfect conformity to himself as his absolute standard. In the Belgic Confession, the righteousness of God is assigned a prominent place regarding his providence (Art. 13), predestination (Art. 16), the doctrine of atonement (Art. 20) and the last judgement (Art. 37).

So God's truth, mercy, righteousness and peace are especially evident as when God comes to save his people, as demonstrated in the death of Jesus Christ. The cross is a clear manifestation of the unity or simplicity of God (Stewart s.a.).

■ God is good, and the overflowing source of all good

'No one is good but God alone' (Mk 10:18). That he is the overflowing fountain of all good means that all that is good flows out of his infinite riches to his creation, which does not live separately from God but in service to him who, out of his goodness, created the heavens and the earth (Janssen 2016, p. 65). In Article 16, the Belgic Confession also speaks of God's 'mere goodness' in connection with the election and in Articles 17, 20 and 34 of his goodness which he pours on us through Jesus Christ and his cross.

The problem of evil and suffering has always been a topic believers struggled with. Free will theists attempt to preserve the belief in God's omnipotence and complete goodness by arguing that it can be fully explained in terms of wrong choices made by God's free creatures (see eds. Piper, Taylor & Kjoss Helseth 2009, pp. 84–109). This issue cannot be dealt with here in full, but eventually, a believer can find rest in the truth that nothing (good or evil) befalls us that is not ultimately from God.[50] Just as the knowledge of God implies truth, so the will of God implies goodness.

50. This is very clearly confessed in Article 13 of the Belgic Confession and QA 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

■ Conclusion

Since the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, the plausibility of belief in God has rapidly decreased, and a general lack of affection for doctrine in general is apparent. Therefore, many of the traditional beliefs concerning God have been modified or abandoned, of which open theism is probably the most prevalent. The God of open theism is 'soothingly free from mystery and gratifyingly zealous to affirm our autonomy', and by their endeavours to present a generally acceptable God, they are modifying the basic attributes of God in order to accommodate the assumption of human autonomy. God's openness is even described as one of his 'attributes of greatness' (see eds. Piper, Taylor & Kjoss Helseth 2009, pp. 14, 118, 138).

There is a need for a reverent, humble and truth-founded appreciation of the attributes of God and an affirmation of God's immanence and transcendence, rather than a one-sided affirmation of his immanence. A study of the attributes of the true God is crucial to fulfilling the apologetic task of the church to defend the true faith, keeping in mind that the doctrine of God serves as the framework for the rest of theology.

It is meaningful and edifying for believers to ponder God's various perfections to understand him better. This knowledge, however, has implications, as Van Genderen and Velema (2008, p. 189) rightly indicate. God's incomprehensibility encourages us to give him all honour. His invisibility teaches us to walk by faith, not by sight. His omnipotence and omnipresence should significantly influence the prayers of the believer, knowing that he sees, hears and strengthens us. His goodness should bring us to live in gratitude to him who sustains and governs all creatures.

Reading Scripture as God's revelation: Perspectives from Belgic Confession Articles 2–7

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■ Introduction

The confession of the Christian church stands and falls on its view of the nature, content and authority of Scripture. Apart from the existence and worship of God, no other confession is as important. The reason for this is rather simple: All other doctrines are based on what the church deduces and consequently confesses from Scripture. The church's view of Scripture – whether high or low – influences their reading of Scripture and the doctrines deduced from it.

That being said, the Bible's nature and authority have been questioned since its pages' composition. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen a rise in criticism directed towards the Bible, especially about its nature (divine revelation vs human reflection), how it should or may be read (hermeneutics) and, consequently, its authority. In light of these voices, the church needs

to comprehend even better what it confesses about Scripture from Scripture itself. This is especially important for churches with a high view of Scripture, such as those within the Reformed tradition.

One of the clearest systematic summaries of what Reformed churches confess about Scripture is in Belgic Confession Articles 2–7. It succinctly describes the means by which we know God, explains that the Bible is the written Word of God, gives a list of the canonical books of Scripture and indicates the grounds for the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. As such, Reformed Christians can use Articles 2–7 in their confession of the nature and authority of Scripture and their defence of these claims.

The question, however, is whether an old confession such as the Belgic Confession is still relevant in the 21st century (cf. Janssen 2016, p. viii). Written in French in the 16th century (1561) by Guido de Brès, in defence of the Protestant faith amidst the persecution suffered by Reformed Protestants in the Netherlands at the hands of the Roman Catholic government,[51] the contemporary relevance of the Belgic Confession may elude some at first glance. This chapter aims to indicate that Articles 2–7 are highly relevant to the current debate about the nature and authority of Scripture and provides parameters and guidelines for addressing various issues related to the debate.

This chapter starts with some prolegomena related to Articles 2–7, which helps understand these articles within their context. Next, the content of these articles is discussed in more detail, focusing on what the church confesses in them and why. This is followed by a discussion of contemporary theological issues related to these articles, indicating how these very articles provide a platform for constructive discussion in our modern context. The chapter concludes by briefly reflecting on the continuing value of Articles 2–7.

■ Prolegomena: Belgic Confession Articles 2–7

■ A bird's-eye view of Belgic Confession Articles 2–7

It is useful for the following discussion to start with a bird's-eye view of Belgic Confession Articles 2–7. Although more is confessed in these articles, as will be seen below, these articles are mainly about the church's confession of the following:

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51. For a discussion of the origin, history and author of the Belgic Confession, see the first chapter of this volume, as well as Bakhuizen van den Brink (ed. 1940, pp. 11–24), Gootjes (2007) and Muller (2010, pp. 12–58).

- Article 2: The means by which we know God
- Article 3: The written Word of God
- Article 4: The canonical books
- Article 5: The authority of Scripture
- Article 6: The difference between canonical and apocryphal books
- Article 7: The sufficiency of Scripture.

■ The place of Articles 2–7 within the Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession consists of 37 articles. As could be expected of a confession, namely a brief and systematic statement of the church's doctrine, the Belgic Confession is structured. While there is a smaller difference of opinion about the exact structure of the confession, there is general consensus as to its greater units.[52] Articles 2–7 form a unit containing the church's confession of God's revelation, specifically his revelation in Scripture.

Articles 2–7 are preceded by Article 1, which contains a brief confession about the existence and being of God. Taken as a whole, the Belgic Confession starts with the confession that God exists (Art. 1) and he can be known by human beings (Art. 2–7). One can argue that the confession about God's revelation in Scripture should come first, as it forms the source of knowledge about God. However, the church's confession of Scripture as God's revelation presupposes that God exists and reveals himself. Janssen (2016, p. 36) correctly states, '[t]here is a circularity at work here'. In my view, the structure of the Belgic Confession is most fitting: it starts with a brief and majestic confession of God and his existence (Art. 1), continues with a confession of God's revelation (Art. 2–7), returns to a confession of the being and work of the Triune God in more detail (Art. 8–11),[53] and then continues with the church's confession of various matters (Art. 12–37).

For the sake of the current chapter, it is important to note that Articles 2–7 form part of the initial articles of the Belgic Confession, and its content (the church's confession about God's revelation in Scripture) forms the foundation for all subsequent articles.

52. For examples of how scholars group the various articles together, see Van Bruggen (1980, p. 160), Heyns (1988, p. 39) and (less convincingly) Van Rooyen (1948, p. 18). The Belgic Confession roughly follows the structure of the Gallican Confession (cf. ed. Schaff 1983a, p. 506), and Calvin was involved in the latter's formation (Brouwer 2013, p. 35). Gootjes (2007, pp. 59–70) investigates the relationship between Calvin and the Belgic Confession, and concludes that 'although Calvin's role was indirect, he was involved in the early history of the Belgic Confession' (2007, p. 70).

53. Cf. Janssen (2016, pp. 20–35), who treats Articles 1 and 8–11 together in a single chapter.

■ The text and translation of Belgic Confession Articles 2–7

The Belgic Confession was originally written in French in 1561 and later translated into Dutch, German and Latin (ed. Schaff 1983a, p. 505). For some discussion of the revision of the text of the Belgic Confession, especially at the Synod of Antwerp in 1566 and the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619, readers are referred to the first chapter of this book.

Gootjes (2007, pp. 117–159) gives a very helpful survey of the changes that were made to the text at the Synod of Antwerp (1566) and the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), especially to the first articles of the confession, which includes Articles 2–7. Of these, most are related to clarifying the meaning of the confession. The most important changes to the articles under investigation in this chapter are arguably the following (Gootjes 2007, p. 156):

- **Article 2:** The opening phrase, 'We confess that we know him as such by two means', was replaced at the Synod of Antwerp by 'We know him by two means' (Van den Brink 2011, p. 274; note 4). In addition, the first means of knowing God used to refer to 'by the created, led and governed word'. This was changed at the Synod of Dort to 'by the creation, *conservation* and government of the whole world' to include the church's confession of God's preservation of the world.
- **Article 4:** Originally, the list of canonical books mostly mentioned the categories of biblical books; it was revised at the Synod of Dort to contain a list of the individual books (Gootjes 2007, p. 156).
- **Article 5:** The text of the article originally referred to the two functions of Scripture: 'for regulating and founding our faith'. A third function was added in the revision of 1566, namely 'confirming our faith'.
- **Article 6:** Similar to the changes made to Article 4, the names of the apocryphal books were written out in the revision of 1618–1619.

The French edition of the Belgic Confession established by the Synod of Dort is viewed by many as the so-called 'authentic text' of the confession (Van den Brink 2011, p. 273). Being a standard confession in Reformed churches worldwide, the Belgic Confession has been translated into various languages.[54] The standard English translation of the Belgic Confession today is (arguably) the translation based on the French text of 1619 made by the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), which it adopted in 1985 (Pelikan & Hotchkiss 2003, p. 406; cf. Gootjes 2007, pp. 185–187). This translation is also used by the Reformed Church in America (cf. Janssen 2016, p. 155) and

54. See Gootjes (2007, pp. 161–190) for an overview of various translations of the Belgic Confession.

is used in the remainder of this chapter.[55] For convenience's sake, it is referred to as the 'CRC translation'.

A comparison between Articles 2–7 in the CRC translation and the English translations used by churches around the world indicates that various churches make use of the CRC translation or a slightly modified version thereof (cf. Reformed Churches of Australia 1991, p. 18; United Reformed Churches in North America [URCNA] 2019). The biggest differences in translation are to be seen in the translation of the Belgic Confession composed by the Canadian Reformed Church (Canadian & American Reformed Churches [CanRC] 2022), which it adopted at Synod Cloverdale in 1983.[56] Focusing on Articles 2–7, most of these differences are related to minor matters such as words of comparison, the use of pronouns, the translation of certain words, the insertion of conjunctions or changes to sentence construction. For the most part, these differences can be ignored in the current investigation. The biggest differences between the CRC and CanRC translations are found in the wording of Articles 4 and 6. Article 4 gives a list of the canonical books of Scripture. The CanRC translation excludes many of the descriptive phrases used in conjunction with biblical book names used in the CRC translation (e.g. 'the books of'; 'the two [books] of'; 'the four major prophets'; 'the other twelve Minor Prophets'; 'the two letters to'). More importantly, the wording of the CanRC translation seems to update the words of Article 4 to bring it up to date with modern scholarship, specifically with regard to the authorship of certain biblical books: it omits the descriptive phrase 'called Paralipomenon' after the reference to 1 and 2 Chronicles;[57] it refers to '(the book) Ezra' rather than 'the first book of Ezra';[58] it omits the description of the Psalms as 'the Psalms of David'[59] and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs as 'the three books of Solomon'; it includes an explicit reference to the book of Lamentations directly after

55. Cf. the translation of Belgic Confession Articles 2–7 in Bakhuizen van den Brink (ed. 1940, pp. 58–69), Schaff (ed. 1983b, pp. 383–389) and Pelikan and Hotchkiss (2003, pp. 407–409).

56. The CanRC translation is also used as the English version of the Belgic Confession by the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA) (n.d.), at least on their website. Interestingly enough, the Afrikaans and English translations of the Belgic Confession published on the website of the RCSA differ, especially in relation to Articles 4 and 6. The Afrikaans translation, for the most part, resembles the CRC translation.

57. This phrase is also dropped in the translation of the Belgic Confession used by the URCNA (2019). The word 'paralipomenon' can be translated as 'supplement', and refers to the (premodern) view that the books of Chronicles supplements what is left out, skipped or omitted from the books of Samuel and Kings (cf. Heyns 1988, p. 95; Van Rooyen 1948, p. 40).

58. Nehemiah was sometimes referred to as the second book of Ezra in the time surrounding the composition of the Belgic Confession, and that is why Article 4 refers to Ezra as the first book of Ezra (cf. Van Bruggen 1980, p. 30; Van Rooyen 1948, p. 40).

59. This omission is also evident in the translation used by the URCNA (2019).

the reference to Jeremiah;[60] and it refers to the 'thirteen' rather than 'fourteen' letters of Paul, excluding Hebrews.[61]

Article 6 explains the difference between canonical and apocryphal books. The CanRC translation seems to diminish the original wording of Article 6 slightly. While the CRC translation states that the church 'may certainly read' these apocryphal books, the CanRC translation states that the church 'may read' them. In the same vein, the CRC translation refers to the canonical books as 'the other holy books', suggesting that the apocryphal books are holy in some sense; the translation followed by the CanRC merely refers to 'the holy books'.[62] This reflects the development that occurred in the church's view of the apocryphal books that took place during and after the Reformation (see discussion later in this chapter).

■ The relationship between Belgic Confession Articles 2–7

Belgic Confession Articles 2–7 have a logical flow. A schematic presentation of this can be seen in Figure 3.1.

Articles 2–7 start with the church's confession about the means by which we know God (Art. 2). The twofold means is explained as God's creation, preservation and government of the 'world',[63] and his holy and divine Word. Articles 3–7 then continue with elaborating on what the church confesses about the second means by which God is known. Article 3 is about the origin or inspiration of God's spoken and subsequent written Word. Article 4 gives an overview of what is viewed as God's inspired Word by giving a list of the 66 canonical books of the Protestant canon. The content of Articles 3 and 4 organically leads to the confession contained in Article 5: because the church confesses Scripture to be God's inspired Word (Art. 3),

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60. To be fair, most churches that use the CRC translation insert a footnote indicating that the reference to 'Jeremiah' in Article 4 includes the book of Lamentations (cf. Christian Reformed Church 2011; Janssen 2016, p. 157). The translation used by the URCNA (2019) refers to 'the five books of the four Major Prophets', explicitly referencing Lamentations between Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

61. Once more, this omission is also to be seen in the translation used by the URCNA (2019). That Hebrews should not be viewed as a Pauline Epistle was already suggested by Calvin in a letter in which he and the brothers of Geneva endorsed the Belgic Confession (cf. Gootjes 2007, p. 68).

62. In addition, although not linked to the argument above, the CanRC translation refers to 'the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men in the Furnace'. The CRC translation merely refers to 'the Song of the Three Children in the Furnace', per implication, including the prayer of Azariah. Bredenhof (2012, p. 305; note 4) indicates that '[i]n the sixteenth century, the Prayer [of Azariah] was included with the Song of the Three Young Men in the Furnace and all other editions follow suit'. The CanRC translation also refers to 'Ecclesiasticus' rather than 'Jesus Sirach' as in the CRC translation.

63. I agree with Van den Brink (2011, p. 274) that in this context, 'world' is the better translation of the original French 'universel' than 'universe'.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  The means by which we know God (Art. 2)                                  │
│                                                                           │
│      1. God's creation, preservation and government of the world          │
│      2. God's holy and divine Word                                        │
│                                                                           │
│                        The origin and inspiration of God's Word (Art. 3)  │
│                                                                           │
│                        A list of the canonical books of Scripture (Art. 4)│
│                                                                           │
│                        The authority of Scripture (Art. 5)                │
│                                                                           │
│                              The apocryphal books (Art. 6)                │
│                                                                           │
│                              The sufficiency of Scripture (Art. 7)        │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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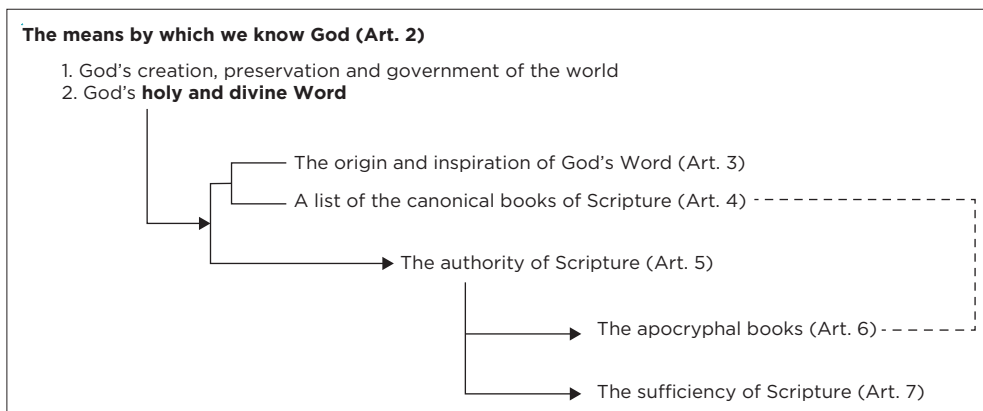
FIGURE 3.1: An illustrated logical flow of Articles 2–7 in the Belgium Confession.

it is authoritative, and the reasons why these books (Art. 4) are viewed as authoritative are stated. In light of the authority of divinely inspired Scripture, Article 6 distinguishes between the canonical and apocryphal books by first listing the apocrypha and then explaining their value and worth. Having distinguished the canonical books from the apocrypha, this section of the Belgic Confession ends with the church's confession of the sufficiency of divinely inspired Scripture for knowing the will and worship of God and the salvation of man (Art. 7).

The remainder of the Belgic Confession does not explicitly refer to Articles 2–7. Rather, as indicated above, these articles, especially the confession of the inspiration, authority and sufficiency of Scripture, are the foundation for everything said in Articles 8–37.

■ The relationship between Belgic Confession Articles 2–7 and other Reformed confessions

A comparison between the Belgic Confession and other Reformed confessions is simplified by the helpful harmonisation of Reformed confessions by Beeke and Ferguson (1999).[64] They provide the text of seven Reformed confessions in parallel columns under systematic theology's traditional categories and subject headings. The seven confessions are the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Canons of Dort (1618–1619), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Westminster

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64. Also see the references provided by Vallensis (1951, pp. 20–37) and the harmony between the three forms of unity provided by the Reformed Churches of Australia (1991, pp. 144–148).

Confession of Faith (1647), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647) and the Westminster Larger Catechism (1648).

Being the oldest of these confessions, Beeke and Ferguson (1999) use the Belgic Confession as their departure point. The following parallels can be pointed out from the tables they provide (cf. Beeke & Ferguson 1999, pp. 8–19):[65]

Article 2: The twofold means by which we know God is explicitly confessed in Westminster Confession of Faith 1.1 and the Westminster Larger Catechism Question 2.[66] Like Belgic Confession Article 2, the Westminster Confession of Faith refers to the sufficiency of God's revelation in nature and his works of creation and providence to leave men without excuse. Both the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Westminster Larger Catechism state that the light of nature is insufficient for the revelation of God necessary for salvation.

Article 3: Similar to Belgic Confession Article 3, both the Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6 Question and Answer 19, the Canons of Dort 1.14 and the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.1 point to God's Word first being spoken and 'afterwards' committed to writing. Still linking to Article 3, the Westminster Confession of Faith refers to the inspiration of Scripture (1.2), specifically in the original Hebrew and Greek (1.8; cf. Canons of Dort 3–4.12).

Article 4: Just like Belgic Confession Article 4, Scripture is confessed as contained in two parts – the Old and the New Testaments – in Second Helvetic Confession 1.1, Westminster Confession of Faith 1.2, Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 2 and Westminster Larger Catechism Question 3. Westminster Confession of Faith 1.2 gives a similar list of the 66 books of the Protestant canon but without using descriptive phrases or references to authorship, as in Belgic Confession Article 4.

Article 5: While Belgic Confession Article 5 confesses a threefold function of Scripture, namely 'the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith', the Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 3 and the Westminster Larger Catechism Question 5 state the purpose as twofold: 'The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man'. Similar to Belgic Confession Article 5, the two greatest reasons for confessing Scripture as God's Word are stated in similar terms in other Reformed confessions: because of the inward work or witness of the Spirit (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5; Westminster Larger Catechism Question 4), and because Scripture contains the evidence or authority in itself (Second Helvetic Confession 1.1; Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5; Westminster Larger Catechism Question 4).

65. There are also similarities between the Belgic Confession and the more recent Belhar Confession (published in 1982). Naudé (2010, p. 5) indicates that the Belhar Confession is similar to the Belgic Confession in the sense that it rejects or answers doctrine against which confession is made (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 12, 13, 15, 29, 35). It is also similar in its confession of the Triune God (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 1, 8–11 and Belhar Confession Art. 1.1). While the Belhar Confession as a whole is based upon the conviction that Scripture is God's inspired Word, it does not have a separate section (or article) on the church's confession about Scripture. This is because of the purpose and aim of the Belhar Confession, namely the church's confession of its unity.

66. This twofold means is also part of the argumentation of the Canons of Dort 3–4.6–7.

Article 6: References to the apocrypha and their worth are found in the Second Helvetic Confession 1.9 and the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.3. The former refers to the fact that while some would have the apocrypha read in the churches, they are 'not alleged to avouch or confirm the authority of faith by them'. The latter is more direct in its evaluation: 'The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings'.

Article 7: Belgic Confession Article 7 begins by confessing that Scripture sufficiently contains the will of God, everything one must believe to be saved and the entire manner of service which God requires. These are also major emphases in the other confessions consulted. Across various articles, they state that the scope of Scripture is the glory (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.5–6; Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 2; Westminster Larger Catechism Question 4) and worship (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.8; Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 3) of God, the salvation of man (Second Helvetic Confession 1.2; Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6–7; Westminster Larger Catechism Question 4), and the rule of faith and obedience (Westminster Larger Catechism Question 3) and life (Second Helvetic Confession 1.2; Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6). Similar to Article 7, other Reformed confessions state that it is unlawful to teach otherwise than what we are taught in Scripture, to add to it or to view any decrees or human traditions as equal to the authority of Scripture (Second Helvetic Confession 1.2; 1.4; 2.2–5; Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6).

The text, as mentioned earlier, confirms that the Belgic Confession Articles 2–7 agree with other Reformed confessions regarding the church's confession about God's revelation, especially in Scripture. However, the Belgic Confession has several unique nuances and arguments (the same applies to the other confessions reviewed above), which will be pointed out in the subsequent section.

■ The church's confession in Belgic Confession Articles 2–7

Having concluded a discussion of the prolegomena of Belgic Confession Articles 2–7, the chapter now turns to a discussion of the content of these articles, specifically what the church confesses in these articles and why.

■ Belgic Confession Article 2: How we know God

In Article 2, the church confesses to know God 'by two means': (1) by his creation, preservation and government of the world and (2) by his holy and divine Word. Article 2, in other words, presupposes that God reveals himself and confesses that he does this by two means. While the word 'revelation' is not used in the article, it is clearly in view, as is confirmed by the use of the phrases 'we know' and 'He makes Himself known' (Coetsee 2020, p. 2;

cf. Heyns 1988, p. 62). Within Reformed dogmatics, these two modes of revelation are referred to as God's 'general' and 'special revelation' (cf. Beeke & Smalley 2019, pp. 185–189).

While many people commonly refer to God's general revelation as his revelation in nature, Article 2 does not employ the word 'nature'. In addition, more than God's revelation in nature is in view. The reference to God's 'government of the world' refers to his historical revelation. In his discussion of Article 2, Van den Brink (2011, p. 275) helpfully defines the phrase 'the natural world' to include both nature and history.

God's revelation employing the natural world is described in Article 2 with a simile: the world is like 'a beautiful book', and all creatures are 'as letters'. This 'book' makes the church ponder 'the invisible things of God', namely his power and divinity. An explicit reference to Romans 1:20 gives Scriptural support, but the margins in the earliest editions also point to Psalm 19:2 (cf. Vallensis 1951, pp. 20–21). Paul's argument in Romans 1:20 is the grounds for the confession's conclusion that 'all these things [God's revelation in the world] are enough to convict humans and to leave them without excuse'. God's revelation in the natural world is sufficient to convince humans of his existence, but it is not sufficient for salvation (cf. Heyns 1988, p. 70; Van Bruggen 1980, p. 22). Van den Brink (2011, p. 276) indicates that this is also Augustine's view; he argued that since Christ cannot be discovered through creation, creation is insufficient for coming to a salvific knowledge of God. God's special revelation in his holy and divine Word is necessary for that.

The latter is the second means by which the church knows God. Some scholars correctly point out that the reference to God's 'holy and divine Word' is not limited to his revelation in Scripture (as is confirmed by the distinction between the spoken and written Word of God in Art. 3; cf. Van Bruggen 1980, p. 24). Nonetheless, Scripture is primarily in view. Although the article does not refer to God's Word as a book, it is implied, forming a parallel with the book of the natural world. Despite the former being much bigger, the church confesses that the book of God's Word reveals him more clearly and more thoroughly (Coetsee 2020, p. 2).

Article 2 ends with the church's confession about the scope of God's Word. The church confesses that God reveals 'as much as we need in this life'. While God is infinitely more than his revelation in his Word (cf. Coetzee 2012, p. 7), his Word is sufficient for revealing to us what is needed for his glory and our salvation (also see Art. 7).

■ Belgic Confession Article 3: The written Word of God

Having confessed God's Word as his clearer means of revelation in Article 2, Article 3 starts with the church's confession about the origin of God's Word. The article quotes 2 Peter 1:21 in support of its claim that the origin of the Word of God is not the will of human beings, but by God Himself. The Holy Spirit moved men and women to speak from God. Once again, while the word 'inspiration' is not used here, it is implied. Various scholars (e.g. Heyns 1988, p. 85; Van Bruggen 1980, p. 26) argue that Article 3 does not directly refer to the inspiration of Scripture because the church of the time did not doubt it; it was not a contested doctrine.

Apart from 2 Peter 1:21, the other *locus classicus* for the church's confession of the inspiration of Scripture (although not referred to in Art. 3) is 2 Timothy 3:16. It states that 'God inspires all Scripture'. The Greek word translated as 'inspire' is *theopneustos*. It is a verbal adjective consisting of the noun *Theos* [God] and the verb *pneo* [breathed], suggesting that God breathes all of Scripture; it comes from his mouth and originates with him.

Building on the confession of the origin of God's Word, Article 3 continues with the church's confession about God's Word in writing. The article presupposes the distinction between the 'spoken' and 'written' Word of God (cf. Heyns 1988, p. 79). Firstly, the Holy Spirit moved people to speak from God; 'afterwards', God commanded his servants to commit his revealed Word to writing.[67] Since not every spoken Word of God is recorded in Scripture (John 21:25 is often quoted in support of this), the extent of the spoken Word is much bigger than the written Word (cf. Osterhaven 1964, p. 34; Van Bruggen 1980, p. 27). Both, however, are authoritative (D'Assonville 1998, p. 189).[68] As with the spoken Word of God, the origin or inspiration of the written Word of God receives special

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67. Zuiddam (2016, p. 3) indicates that the French text refers to God commanding his servants to commit his 'oracles' to writing, emphasising the origin of this revelation that is being committed to writing.

68. For a study of the use of the phrase 'Word of God' and the use of 2 Peter 1:21 in Article 3, see D'Assonville (1998) and Zuiddam (2016). D'Assonville (1998, pp. 185–194) concludes that the concept 'Word of God' primarily emphasises God as the origin of Scripture, that he took the initiative to reveal himself and that Scripture consequently has authority. Zuiddam (2016, p. 6), on the other hand, argues that there is a close connection between revelation and experience in 2 Peter 1:16–21, with the apostle's personal experience strengthening his confidence in the Scriptures and confirming their authority. He argues that the same pattern can be seen in Article 3. For a (one-sided) critical discussion of 2 Peter 1:21 in Article 3, see Scheffler (1987, pp. 71–72).

emphasis in Article 3. God initiated both the act of people speaking God's Word and of his servants writing it down (Coetsee 2020, p. 4).

Janssen (2016, p. 40) points out that at the time of the composition of the Belgic Confession, a variety of theories about the inspiration of Scripture did not exist. These came later. Of all the theories proposed in the subsequent centuries (cf. Heyns 1988, pp. 86–88), the view of the 'organic' inspiration of Scripture fits the content of Scripture and the formulation of the confessions the best (eds. Bavinck & Bolt 2011, pp. 101–110; Berkhof 1996, p. 153; Coetzee 2012, p. 8; Frame 2010, p. 142; Van Genderen & Velema 2008, pp. 80–83). The view of the organic inspiration of Scripture states that the Holy Spirit guided the human authors within their own time and culture with their unique circumstances and experiences to put God's Word into writing. Though not of human origin, Scripture comes through human instrumentality (Osterhaven 1964, p. 33). Scripture, therefore, 'has both a divine and human nature' (Coetsee & Goede 2022, p. 17). Article 3 also mentions the fact that God wrote the two tablets of the law with his own finger (cf. Ex 31:18; Dt 5:22).

The purpose of God committing his Word to writing is also emphasised in Article 3. It states that God did this 'with special care for us and our salvation' (see Art. 2 and Art. 7). The article concludes that in light of this, these writings are called 'holy and divine Scriptures'. Although the authority of Scripture will be expounded in Article 5, this final clause paves the way for the following exposition. All of Scripture is God's Word, has authority and should be obeyed.

■ Belgic Confession Article 4: The canonical books

Article 4 contains a list of the books of Scripture that the church confesses as God's written Word. Most of the article consists of the names (sometimes with descriptions of the author or the type of literature) of the 66 books within the Protestant canon. While there is some difference between Article 4 and modern scholarship about the authorship of biblical books,[69] the emphasis in Article 4 is not on authorship; it is on the canonicity of these books (Van Bruggen 1980, p. 30).

The opening words distinguish the Protestant canon from other canon lists. Scholars indicate that the reference to Scripture consisting of two parts, namely the Old and New Testaments, is 'against the Anabaptists who tended to neglect or downplay the Old Testament', while 'the reference to the 66 books of the canon is against the Roman Catholic Church that

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69. For a discussion of the references to the authorship in Article 4, see the section 'The text and translation of Belgic Confession Articles 2–7'; cf. Bosman (1987, p. 55).

includes the apocrypha in their canon' (Coetsee 2020, p. 5; cf. Bosman 1987, p. 55). The list of canonical books also refers to the Reformed view of a closed canon; nothing should be added or taken away from Scripture (see Art. 7). In addition, these opening words emphasise the Reformed view of the unity of the Old and New Testaments (Van Bruggen 1980, p. 28), as well as the church's high view of Scripture. It states that these are the 'canonical books with which there can be no quarrel at all', once again referring to the authority of these books, which will be expounded in Article 5.

■ Belgic Confession Article 5: The authority of Scripture

Article 5 'contains the Reformed confession regarding the authority of Scripture and why these books are viewed as authoritative' (Coetsee 2020, p. 6). The article starts by briefly reiterating arguments of the previous articles and then drawing the lines together. The church 'receives all these books' (referring to the inspiration of Scripture in Art. 3) 'and these only' (referring to the list of canonical books in Art. 4) 'as holy and canonical', with the purpose of 'regulating, founding and establishing of our faith'. These books 'alone have authority when it comes to matters of the faith, and they alone can bind the conscience of man' (Coetsee & Goede 2022, p. 18). As will be elaborated in Article 7, no extrabiblical revelation or tradition can do the same.

The church, continues Article 5, 'believe[s] without a doubt all things contained' in the books of Scripture. Since these books alone are divinely inspired, they alone are authoritative. Various scholars indicate that there is a direct correlation between the inspiration and authority of Scripture in Reformed theology (cf. Beeke & Smalley 2019, pp. 335–343; Van Genderen & Velema 2008, pp. 84–96).

While Article 5 does not mention any 'grounds' for the authority of Scripture, it does explain how the church arrives at the recognition of its authority (Van Bruggen 1980, p. 33). It states that the authority of Scripture does not lie with or within the church ('not so much because the church receives and approves them as such'), but in two claims of faith (cf. Janssen 2016, p. 42): (1) the deepest and most decisive guarantee is that the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that the books of Scripture are from God and, closely linking onto this, (2) the books themselves prove themselves to be from God (the so-called *autopistia* of Scripture; cf. Van den Belt 2008; Vorster 2020, p. 6), which, as could be expected, is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (cf. Heyns 1988, p. 100). In short, the Holy Spirit enables the church to recognise Scripture as God's Word.

Article 5 ends with the statement that 'even the blind themselves are able to see that the things predicted in them do happen'. Scholars differ on whether this should be viewed as a third 'proof' for the authority of Scripture (e.g. Clark 2014, following Beets)[70] or whether this links onto the second claim of faith: the *autopistia* of Scripture is so clear that even the blind can see these things (Heyns 1988, p. 100). In my view, the latter seems more convincing.

■ Belgic Confession Article 6: The difference between canonical and apocryphal books

Linking onto Articles 4 and 5, Article 6 once again refers to the exclusive number of canonical books by distinguishing between them and the apocrypha.

Article 6 begins with a list of Old Testament apocrypha contained in the Roman Catholic canon. Originally, the Old Testament apocrypha listed in Article 6 were not part of the Jewish canon; they were Greek writings which originated towards the end of the Old Testament period and the first centuries of the Christian era (Van Bruggen 1980, p. 35). These writings were included in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. Jerome also included the apocrypha in the Vulgate, which led to their inclusion in the Roman Catholic canon.

During the Reformation, the inspiration and authority of these books were doubted. The Council of Trent (1546) claimed that these books belong to Scripture (Bosman 1987, p. 55; Heyns 1988, p. 104). The Reformers, however, did not view them as part of divinely inspired Scripture. They argued that their content does not convince that they are God's speech to his people (Janssen 2016, p. 41). Consequently, they returned to the Jewish canon of the Old Testament (Coetsee 2020, p. 7).

The remainder of Article 6 states the worth and limitations of the apocrypha. According to Article 6, 'the church may certainly read these books and learn from them', but only 'as far as they agree with the canonical books'. The apocrypha, however, 'do not have such power and virtue' to confirm any point of the Christian religion, and they cannot (may not)

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70. Clark (2014) indicates that Article 5's reference to the 'fulfilment' of the things predicted in Scripture is ambiguous in the French text of the Confession: the verb *adviennet* can either be rendered as 'fulfilling' or 'fulfilled'. The former would refer to things being fulfilled during the time of the composition of the Confession; the latter would refer to things that were fulfilled in the canonical period. Clark (2014, n.p.) argues that De Brès intended both, specifically that 'events of the 16th century', namely the persecution of Reformed believers, 'also served as confirmation of the truth of Scripture'.

'detract from the authority of the other holy books'.[71] They are not on the same level as the canonical books.

In practice, the Reformers did not immediately abandon the use of the apocrypha altogether. Both Van Bruggen (1980, p. 35) and Bredenhof (2012, p. 320) indicate that the status of the apocrypha received attention at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) when they discussed whether the apocrypha should be included in a new Bible translation commissioned by the synod. Not to offend foreign delegates of the synod, the synod took a mediating position, including the apocryphal books but clearly distinguishing them from the canonical books 'by a different font, new pagination, and an introduction that warned against the errors contained in these writings' (Bredenhof 2012, p. 320). In later Reformed translations of the Bible, these books were omitted (cf. Van Rooyen 1948, p. 56), and they gradually fell into total disuse in Reformed circles (Bosman 1987, p. 56). Bredenhof (2012, p. 320) correctly indicates that 'the default position among many Reformed Protestants is that of the Westminster Confession' of Faith 1.3, namely that these books are not divinely inspired, are not part of the canon and have no authority in the church.

■ Belgic Confession Article 7: The sufficiency of Scripture

Article 7 is about the sufficiency of Scripture for the will and worship of God and the salvation of humanity. It states that the church believes that Scripture 'contains the will of God completely', sufficiently contains 'everything one must believe to be saved' and describes 'the entire manner of service which God requires of us […] at great length'. The sufficiency of Scripture, in other words, is not related to the perception that Scripture teaches everything about everything, but that it contains everything that one needs to believe for salvation (Coetsee 2020, p. 8; cf. Beeke & Smalley 2019, pp. 395–406; Heyns 1988, pp. 106–107; Osterhaven 1964, p. 47; Van Genderen & Velema 2008, pp. 102–105).

71. Bredenhof (2012, p. 306) indicates that Guido de Brès included references to the apocrypha among the proof-texts contained in the margins of the first editions of the Belgic Confession. He argues that he probably included this 'with an eye to Rome' (Bredenhof 2012, p. 307), 'trying to reach Roman Catholics with the gospel' (p. 308). Bredenhof (2012, p. 321) concludes that 'De Brès and the Reformed churches in the Low Counties were self-consciously desirous of being catholic […] they respected the tradition insofar as it agreed with the Word of God. This is why they could unapologetically make use of the apocryphal writings, criticize them where necessary, and at the same time advocate for their rightful place in the edification of the church'. Bredenhof (2012, p. 321), however, indicates that these apocryphal proof-texts were removed from the revised edition of the Belgic Confession of the Synod of Antwerp (1566).

In light of this, the church rejects all teachings other than what Scripture reveals. Scriptural support for this is found in Paul's curse on anyone – even an apostle or angel – proclaiming a gospel contrary to the one the apostles proclaimed (Gl 1:8). Referring to Deuteronomy (4:2; 12:32) and Revelation (22:18–19), which forbids adding or subtracting from the Word of God, Article 7 concludes that 'the teaching' of Scripture 'is perfect and complete in all aspects'.

Against the prevailing Roman Catholic context within which the confession originated, the church does not consider any human writings, customs, traditions or decisions as above or even equal to the divine writings. In fact, the church rejects 'with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule'. Once more, support for this rejection is taken from Scripture itself (1 Jn 4:1; 2 Jn 10).[72] This does not mean that tradition plays no role in Reformed theology (Heyns 1988, p. 108). It does emphasise, however, the primacy of Scripture in the confession and life of the church, as well as the principle of *semper reformanda*.

■ Addressing contemporary theological issues from Belgic Confession Articles 2–7

The Belgic Confession originated within a specific context, is intricately tied up with its context (cf. Janssen 2016, p. 2; Van Niekerk 1987, p. 14) and should always be interpreted within this context. That being said, being a confession, the heart of the Belgic Confession is a summary and systematisation of timeless truths from Scripture. Consequently, Reformed Christians argue that it is relevant in each time and age and will continue to be so.

This section provides a discussion of contemporary theological issues related to Belgic Confession Articles 2–7, indicating how these very articles provide a platform for constructive discussion in our modern context.

■ Article 2: God reveals himself by two means

Belgic Confession Article 2 is a major source of theological discussion. Within Articles 2–7, no other article has received more scholarly discussion than Article 2. Amongst others, the following topics are in view. For the purposes of this chapter, only brief discussion and evaluation are provided.

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72. For critical discussion of the quotations and references to Scripture in Article 7, see Bosman (1987, pp. 56–57) and Scheffler (1987, p. 73).

☐ Is the confession of two means of revelation false and dangerous?

Van den Brink (2011, pp. 280–289) indicates how Article 2's use of the metaphor of two books as two means by which we know God was subjected to heated theological critique in the first half of the 20th century.[73] The biggest objection came from the side of Karl Barth. As with all great theological controversies, it should be understood within its context. Witnessing how 'people could exploit their presupposed knowledge of God derived from other sources than the gospel for nationalistic purposes', specifically in the form of German nationalism during the two world wars, Barth was passionately opposed to all forms of natural theology, viewing it as '*the* great enemy of Christian faith and theology' (Van den Brink 2011, p. 283; emphasis his).[74] Scripture, according to him, should be viewed as the only source of God's revelation.

The result, as Van den Brink (2011, pp. 284–289) points out, was that various scholars, especially within Dutch theology, agreed with Barth's critique of natural theology and attempted 'to read Article 2 in such a way that this critique is not applicable or at least not completely so' (Van den Brink 2011, p. 284; cf. Van Bruggen 1980, pp. 22–23). This included reversing the order of the two sources (making Scripture the lens or glasses through which we read the book of nature; cf. Van Rooyen 1948, p. 28), viewing the 'we' of Article 2 as believers (cf. Van Bruggen 1980, p. 23) or interpreting God's revelation in the world as objective, but our interpretation of this as distorted and consequently subjective. Van den Brink disproves all these attempts, indicating that the metaphor of glasses refers to knowing *God* better through the spectacles of Scripture, that Romans 1 refers to unbelievers and that Article 2 starts with 'We *know* God'. He concludes that Guido de Brès, in Article 2, indeed refers to two means by which God reveals himself to mankind. It is important, however, to note that De Brès emphasises the superiority of Scripture as the source of God's revelation (Van den Brink 2011, p. 289).

While the warnings of Barth should always be kept in mind, a close reading of Article 2 should be followed. The question is, 'What is God's general revelation about according to Article 2?' The answer, in my view,

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73. For a very interesting and helpful study of the origin of the two-book metaphor, see Van den Brink (2011, pp. 274–280). Amongst others, he indicates that the two-book metaphor was a stimulus for 17th-century experimental research into nature, based on the conviction that nature was a source of knowledge of its Maker.

74. Vorster (2020, p. 4; note 6) points out that Barth, 'in his debate with Brunner, questioned the viewpoint that Calvin accredited any theological significance to the idea of natural law'. Vorster points out that Barth misinterprets Calvin in this regard and that he indeed entertained the idea of natural law.

solves the greatest part of the problem. God's general revelation is about his 'eternal power and divinity' (cf. Rm 1:20). It is not an additional means through which God reveals additional information about various subjects; rather, the natural world reveals his power and divinity; it reveals him.

In short, is the confession of two means of revelation false and dangerous? Yes, if Article 2 is misunderstood, misquoted and misused. No, if Article 2 is read as it should be, namely referring to the natural world revealing the eternal power and divinity of God. The next section deals with a similar problem.

□ Can (should) the findings of theology and science be harmonised?

The argument is that since God's revelation in the natural world and his revelation in his divine Word are in fact *God's revelation*, the two means of revelation will not contradict one another. Where such a perceived contradiction is evident, it not only should be harmonised, but it can be. Belgic Confession Article 2 consequently creates the opportunity to listen to both the voices of the natural sciences and theology, especially in regard to the process of evolution (Dreyer 2013, pp. 1–8; Van den Brink 2018).

At first glance, this sounds logical. The problem, however, is that this view often has a misconception of what God's general revelation reveals. It easily interprets God's general revelation as science, or more specifically, the findings of science. As stated above, a close reading of Article 2 makes it clear what the article states about God's revelation in the natural world: it makes 'us ponder the invisible things of God: *God's eternal power and divinity*, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20' (own added emphasis). God's general revelation is about God.

A number of scholars have pointed this out. VandenBerg (2010, pp. 18–21), who indicates that De Brès is following in the footsteps of Calvin, argues that Article 2 is not referring to knowledge in general, but knowledge of God. Bolt (2011, pp. 315–332), who refers to Berkouwer in support of his view, argues that God's general revelation is not about creation or history or the data of science or science itself, but about God. Creation testifies to him (Bolt 2011, p. 320); it is his self-revelation (cf. Janssen 2016, p. 36). VandenBerg (2010, p. 21) fittingly asks: '"What do the two books share in common?" The answer is, "the author"'. This means that questions directed towards nature and Scripture should primarily be about the revelation about God (cf. Erasmus 2014, p. 4).

Accordingly, both VandenBerg (2010, pp. 16–24) and Bolt (2011, pp. 315–332) argue that the use of Belgic Confession Article 2's distinction between the 'two books of revelation' in the science and Bible controversy is mistaken and misleading.[75] In my view, the word 'often' should be inserted: the use of the two books of revelation in the science and Bible controversy is *often* mistaken and misleading. It can be fruitful and in agreement with Article 2, as long as it recognises what the natural world reveals: the power and divinity of God.

This does not mean that Reformed theology is negative towards science or the findings of science. Not at all. Reformed Christians (should) take the natural world seriously as a source of revelation about God. This is evidenced by the numerous scientific discoveries from the Reformation until the present by Reformed believers (cf. Van den Brink 2011, pp. 277–280). Reformed theology, however, has a nuanced position: it makes use of the findings of the natural and human sciences (Bolt 2011, p. 322; cf. Van den Brink 2018, p. 87), but judges science and historical developments in the light of Scriptural revelation (Bolt 2011, p. 329).

As to the question whether Article 2 can be used in the debate about creation and evolution, the answer seems to be: it depends on who you ask. Some would say 'yes' (Van den Brink 2018), while others would say 'no' (Bolt 2011, pp. 315–332). In the process of weighing these arguments, the referent of God's revelation in the natural world should be kept in mind.

☐ Is revelation in the natural world sufficient for salvation?

Throughout the history of the church, some scholars have argued that God's revelation in nature is sufficient for salvation. One of the primary motivations for this is a specific interpretation of Romans 1:20.

Van Wyk (2003, pp. 671–695) gives a helpful overview of the Reformational view of the topic. He concludes that within Reformed theology, God's general revelation is viewed as sufficient to convince humans of his existence and to take away all excuse; it provides human beings with a natural awareness of God (cf. Van den Brink 2011, p. 291); but it is insufficient for salvation. As a result of sin, humankind needs God's clearer revelation through Scripture, revealing to them the necessity for salvation and the availability of salvation in Christ. Vorster (2020, p. 4)

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75. Bolt (2011, p. 317) indicates that attempts at reconciling the two books of Revelation presses 'the it-is-like dimension so hard that the it-is-not-like is mostly forgotten'.

concludes more or less the same. He points to Calvin's argument of the 'seed or religion' that is sown in all humankind even after the fall (Calvin *Inst*. I:4:1:12), which prevents humankind and society from falling into total chaos (Calvin *Inst*. II:2:13:166), but that this seed of religion is not enough for salvation.

Without the light of God's revelation in Scripture, his revelation in the natural world merely produces natural religion, which Bolt (2011, p. 316) strikingly defines as 'the universal response of human beings to the nearness of God in creation'.

□ Article 2 functions as a motivation for missions

Contrary to the popular view that the Reformed confessions lack references to the church's missionary call, Krüger (2007, pp. 549–570), in his missionary reading of the confessions, indicates that Belgic Confession Articles 1 and 2 contain 'one of the strongest missionary motifs in Scripture and in our confessions'. God, who exists as the only God (Art. 1) and reveals himself to man (Art. 2), calls human beings into fellowship with him (Krüger 2007, p. 564). Because this is who God is and what he does, the church should fulfil her calling by proclaiming the gospel and calling others to faith in this God who reveals himself.

□ Refuting various -isms

Belgic Confession Article 2 refutes a number of -isms. In this article, the church confesses God as Revealer, Creator, Preserver, Governor and almighty God. The content and formulation of this chapter disproves the following:

Atheism: Against the convictions of atheism, Articles 1–2 confess that God exists and that this existing God reveals himself.

Agnosticism: In contrast to agnosticism, which argues that the existence of God is unknowable, the church confesses from Article 2 that God reveals himself. He is knowable. From Scripture, the church knows who God is, what he is doing and what the purpose of humankind is.

Pantheism: Against pantheism, God is clearly distinguished from creation in Article 2. He is the Creator. The universe is not a manifestation of God, but rather it testifies to God.

Gnosticism: Amongst others, Gnosticism teaches that the physical world is evil. Belgic Confession Article 2, however, refutes this view by referring to the word as a 'beautiful book' (cf. Janssen 2016, p. 37).

Deism: Against deism, Article 2 confesses that the natural world is not left to its own devices. God preserves and governs the natural word. Not only in the context within which the Belgic Confession originated, but in every era since, this serves as a source of great comfort to the church.

■ Article 3–7: Scripture as the written, authoritative and sufficient Word of God

□ Not mere human reflection, but revelation

The church has always confessed Scripture as God's revelation. This, however, has been challenged by some throughout the centuries, and is challenged by many in our day and age. Some argue that Scripture contains mere human reflection about God: it describes to us what the people of Israel and the early church thought about God, not what God reveals about himself. In this view, Scripture should be approached and interpreted as a collection of 'religious experience[s] of one small part of mankind' (Osterhaven 1964, p. 36; cf. Coetzee 2012, p. 6) or as excerpts or fragments of ancient history. This, of course, directly ties in with the question about the authority of Scripture (see following discussion) and leads to diluting or dismissing its authority.

As stated in the introduction, the question about the nature of Scripture is foundational for the church's confession as a whole. Within Reformed theology, Scripture is viewed as God's self-revelation (cf. Vorster 2020, p. 1) and as God's second and clearer means of revelation (Art. 2), his divinely inspired Word (Art. 3).

□ What about the other 'Gospels', 'Acts', 'Epistles' and 'Apocalypses'?

In recent years, there has been a bit of an upsurge in interest in the New Testament apocrypha (Ehrman & Pleše 2011, p. vii). Dan Brown's (2003) mystery-thriller novel, *The Da Vinci code*, for example, has made various people wonder whether the early church suppressed certain parts of its history in order to popularise their view of Jesus and to keep certain people and groups in power. Is it possible that other 'Gospels', 'Epistles' and 'Apocalypses' were suppressed in order to support the authority of the books contained in the Roman Catholic or Protestant canons? What should be made, for example, of the different pictures painted of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Judas?

Belgic Confession Articles 4–6 can provide a springboard for this discussion. While they do not answer most of the questions asked in this debate (especially those by conspiracy theorists), they do provide the basic arguments for a discussion:

> **The process of canonisation:** Being a confession, Belgic Confession Articles 4–6 does not elaborate on the history of the canonisation of the Bible. For this, more detailed studies should be consulted. Belgic Confession Article 5, however, does make a very important statement in this regard. It starts with the words: 'We *receive* all these books' (own added emphasis), hinting at how the canon came

into being. No church meeting decided on the list of canonical books, or awarded canonical status to these books. Rather, at the Synods of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397), the church reflected on the list of canonical books in use by the churches and accepted that these books have divine authority (Heyns 1988, p. 96; cf. Janssen 2016, p. 41). Put differently, the church did not and does not make these books canonical; they 'receive' these books as canonical.

The exclusion of Old Testament apocrypha: Belgic Confession Article 6 can be used to explain why the Old Testament apocrypha were excluded from the Protestant canon and what their worth and limitations are according to the Reformed view.

The disownment of New Testament apocrypha: In discussions on why the New Testament apocrypha were excluded from the canon, Belgic Confession Articles 4–6 are silent. This silence, however, is quite telling. Article 6 does not mention the New Testament apocrypha because their inclusion was not a contentious issue during the Reformation. Not only did the Roman Catholic Church of the day not include these texts in their canon, but the church from its earliest days did the same. Except for one or two exceptions, the New Testament apocrypha were never part of the Christian canon or considered as such. The New Testament apocrypha never had the same popularity as their Old Testament counterparts (Bosman 1987, p. 56). The primary reasons for this are that the New Testament apocrypha are dated later than the New Testament books, and they contain (strange) doctrine that does not correspond with that of the New Testament.

Starting with these arguments, critical and more detailed discussion can follow at the hand of various useful sources about the content of the New Testament apocrypha (cf. Ehrman & Pleše 2011; ed. Elliot 1993; ed. Schneemelcher 1991)[76] and the formation of the biblical canon (e.g. Bruce et al. 2012; McDonald 2007).

☐ Authority

The question about the authority of Scripture is quite common in discussions about its nature and content and the extent of the canon. A number of excellent works have been published on this (cf. Barrett 2016; Van den Belt 2008; Wright 2011).

In the time of the composition of the Belgic Confession, the discussion about authority centred around the question of the relationship between the authority of Scripture and the authority of church tradition. Belgic Confession Article 5 plainly states that only Scripture can bind the conscience of man in matters of faith, while Article 7 states that no human writings, customs or traditions are equal to it. The authority of Scripture is stressed. As such, these articles can be used in modern discussions about the authority of Scripture, indicating that Scripture alone can regulate, found and establish our faith.

76. Ehrman and Pleše (2011) provide an introduction to various Infancy Gospels, Ministry Gospels and writings, as well as a copy of the original language of these texts with a facing-page English translation.

It is striking, however, to realise that the concept of authority itself is being scrutinised in the modern context. Janssen (2016, p. 46) convincingly indicates that the issue for contemporary culture is not between Scripture and church tradition but authority itself. The question is: what authority can compel human beings to be or do anything? A quick Google search indicates that the question of authority is indeed asked on many fronts.

In my view, Belgic Confession Articles 1–7 can be used as a platform for this debate. From these articles, one can argue that God is the ultimate authority (Art. 1), and that he sufficiently reveals his will in Scripture (Art. 2, 7) that he inspired (Art 3). If one agrees with these premises, it is logical to deduce that Scripture is authoritative and should be obeyed. If Scripture is what it states in its pages and what is confessed in the Belgic Confession, it has authority as God's Word.

Closely linked to this, Scripture reveals that the civil government – being ordained by God – also has authority, and believers are called to submit themselves to the government (cf. Rm 13:1–7). Because this is what Scripture teaches, it is confessed by the church, amongst others in Belgic Confession Article 36, which enjoys detailed discussion in a subsequent chapter of this volume. This, of course, is a contentious matter, and one that requires incorporating various nuanced views. Nonetheless, along with Articles 1–7, Article 36 provides a platform for modern discussions about authority.

☐ 'God spoke to me …'

If God is a revealing God (Art. 2), does he still reveal himself to people today? The relevancy of this question is confirmed by the often-heard words in the modern context: 'God spoke to me'.

The answer within the Reformed tradition, based on Belgic Confession Articles 2–7, would be that it depends on what one means. Yes, God still reveals himself to people today through the natural world and more specifically through his written Word (Art. 2–3). God is still speaking from the very pages of Scripture that he inspired and had written down (Art. 3; cf. Coetsee & Jordaan 2015, p. 9). Moreover, him being God, it is absolutely within his power to reveal himself in any fashion to anyone, including speaking audibly today. But it is highly unlikely. Since Scripture is sufficient to know the will and worship of God and the salvation of man (Art. 2, 7), the reason for God's extrabiblical revelation would be unclear. Moreover, if such extrabiblical revelation occurs, it cannot and will not alter anything God has revealed in Scripture, since the canon is closed, God's Word is authoritative (Art. 4–5) and since God cannot lie or contradict himself (cf. Nm 23:19; 1 Sm 15:29; Heb 6:18). Scripture alone binds the conscience of human beings for regulating, founding and confirming their faith (Art. 5).

In my view, weighing what people mean when they say 'God spoke to me' is of crucial importance. If they mean that they have experienced God's guidance or comfort through the pages of Scripture, the natural world or the acts or words of fellow human beings, this would agree with the Reformed position. If, however, they mean that they received extrabiblical revelation from God, it will be highly doubted and subjected to intense scrutiny (cf. Coetsee & Goede 2022, pp. 19, 21).

□ What is Scripture all about?

Belgic Confession Articles 2–7 address the critical question: what is Scripture all about? It answers that Scripture reveals to mankind the will of God, what one must believe to be saved, and how God wants to be worshiped (Art. 7). It reveals to us what is needed in this life 'for God's glory and for our salvation' (Art. 2). God has committed his Word to writing 'for us and our salvation' (Art. 3).

This answer is important, because the scope of Scripture has been viewed in different ways, especially in the last century or so. Some modern hermeneutical paradigms view 'the purpose of Scripture as justifying some form of socio-economical, cultural, ethnic, colonial or sexual liberation' (Coetsee & Goede 2022, p. 21). Scripture itself does not testify to this, and consequently this is not what the Reformed faith confesses. Sad to say, many of these hermeneutical paradigms are ideologically driven, (ab)using Scripture merely for their own agendas. Belgic Confession Articles 2 and 7 can be used in this modern debate to point out what the scope and purpose of Scripture is according to Scripture itself.

□ Sound hermeneutics

Closely linked to the previous discussion, Belgic Confession Articles 2–7 have much to say about Reformed hermeneutics. For some of these implications, see Coetsee and Goede (2022, pp. 20–21). In short, Belgic Confession Articles 2–7 guard the church from wilfully reading Scripture against its grain and forcing Scripture to provide answers to questions it does not attempt to answer (cf. Osterhaven 1964, pp. 47–49).

■ Conclusion

As seen in the previous section, Belgic Confession Articles 2–7 are highly relevant for the current debate about the nature, content and authority of Scripture, and they provide parameters and guidelines for addressing these issues.

The continuing value of Belgic Confession Articles 2–7 is that they enable Reformed believers to comprehend what they confess about Scripture from Scripture itself, and consequently to validate and substantiate these claims. Doing this provides the firm foundation for all other doctrines confessed by the church, amongst others as expressed in the Belgic Confession. This foundation is the wonderful fact and comfort that:

> God makes himself known to us more clearly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for God's glory and for our salvation. (Art. 2)

All these are equal: The doctrine of the Trinity in the Belgic Confession (Articles 8–11)

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■ Introduction

Following upon its confession of the Christian faith in the one God (Art. 1) and its discussion of the two means by which this God can be known (Art. 2), the Belgic Confession dwells quite extensively on a theme of crucial importance to the Reformation: the doctrine of Scripture (Art. 3–7). Next, immediately after having stated that the 66 books of the canon (Art. 4), unlike the apocryphal books (Art. 6), are authoritative for the Christian faith (Art. 5) and sufficient for our salvation (Art. 7), the confession moves to a discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity (Art. 8–11). It is this part of the confession in particular that will concern us in this chapter.

In the first words of Article 8, the connection with the preceding part is made by declaring that '[i]n keeping with this truth and Word of God we believe in one God, who is one single essence, in whom there are three

persons' (Billings 2013, p. 31; note that all quotations from the Belgic Confession are taken from this edition). Whereas the phrase 'this truth' should perhaps be taken as referring back to the text of 2 John 10 with which Article 7 had ended, by adding 'and Word of God' the scope of the reference is immediately widened so as to encompass the entire Bible (some translations repeat the particle 'this' before 'Word of God', so as to emphasise the reference to 2 John, but the original text does not do this; cf. Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 80). In this way, after a short digression of the Belgic Confession at the end of Article 7 (which can be traced by comparing the two columns in Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 78), the link with the Gallican Confession is taken up again at the beginning of the new section on the Trinity. According to both confessions, it is in accordance with the Bible as a whole not only to believe in one God, which seems quite uncontroversial, but also to believe that in this one God's single essence there are three Persons. Before substantiating this claim, however, the confession first continues to explain in traditional language who these three Persons are, and that, although they are not to be divided as if there were three gods, they are to be distinguished by characteristics that each Person has of its own ('incommunicable properties'). It is stated that 'all three are equal from eternity', so that there is 'neither a first nor a last' among them, since they are one 'in truth and power, in goodness and mercy' (closing words of Art. 8).

Next, it is time to show that these statements of faith are in accordance with Scripture indeed. Interestingly, however, Article 9 adds that we know 'these things' (i.e. the ones mentioned in Article 8) not just from Scripture but also 'from the effects of the [three divine] persons, especially those we feel within ourselves'. Thus, just as in Article 2, twofold access to the knowledge of God is acknowledged: Scripture and something else. In this case, Scripture is mentioned first, and the 'something else' is not specified as the universe (as in Article 2) but as the effects of the work of the three divine Persons, especially as these are tangible in the inner lives of the believers. In accordance with this division, Article 9 first enumerates seven biblical passages from which the doctrine of the Trinity purportedly can be derived (Gn 1:26–27, Gn 3:22, Mt 3:17, Mt 28:19, Lk 1:35, 2 Cor 13:14, and 1 Jn 5:7), and then moves on to say a bit more on 'the particular works and activities of these three persons in relation to us'. As it turns out, the works of the Father and the Son in our creation and redemption are to be located outside of us, but the sanctifying work of the Spirit is experienced 'in our hearts'. Presumably, therefore, it is through the work of the Spirit who lives in our hearts in particular that we feel some activities of the divine Persons 'within ourselves'. Finally, Article 9 states that 'this doctrine of the Holy Trinity' is not in any way new, but 'has always been maintained in the true church' and can also be found in the ecumenical creeds as well in 'what the ancient fathers decided in agreement with them'.

Moving on to some of the presuppositions of the doctrine of the Trinity, Articles 10 and 11 articulate the deity of the Son and the Spirit, respectively, again using quite traditional language. In Article 10, special emphasis is placed on the eternal pre-existence of the Son of God, for which textual evidence is adduced from Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, John 1, Micah 5 and Hebrews 7. In Article 11 it stands out that, as in most Protestant confessions, the so-called *filioque* (i.e. the teaching that the Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but also 'from the Son') is adopted from the medieval Western tradition in a self-evident way. There is no sign of awareness of its deeply contested history, in which it had been formally added to the Nicene Creed by Pope Benedict VIII in 1014, occasioning the great schism between the Western and Eastern churches in 1054 (Oberdorfer 2001; ed. Visscher 1981). It is acknowledged that the Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity 'in regard to order', but most of all his essential unity with the Father and the Son is emphasised. With the *inclusio* 'as the Scriptures teach' this part of the Belgic Confession is closed by reminding the reader of how it began, viz. with stating upfront that the doctrine of the Trinity is 'in keeping with [...] the Word of God' (first words of Art. 8). The Belgic Confession then goes on with confessional expositions of the work of the Father in creation (Art. 12–16), the work of the Son in redemption (Art. 17–23) and the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration (Art. 24), before taking up a couple of other doctrinal themes (Art. 25–37).

What is the contemporary relevance of the Belgic Confession's section on trinitarian doctrine (Art. 8–11)? In what follows, we will attempt to disclose this by first examining the specific location of the doctrine within the Belgic Confession's overall scheme. Next, we will discuss the way in which the Belgic Confession highlights the scriptural basis of the doctrine of the Trinity in Article 9. This will naturally lead us to an exploration of the doctrine's soteriological and even practical relevance, as the Reformed tradition especially has attempted to steer clear of abstract speculation with regard to the doctrine's metaphysical ramifications. We will end with some conclusions.

■ On the One and on the triune God: A tragic split?

Guido de Brès did not devise the text of the Belgic Confession all by himself, but made use of several sources which he adopted, expanded and adapted to his own purposes. In particular, as we saw already, he drew heavily on the Gallican Confession, a French Reformed confession that had appeared in 1559 and a draft of which had been provided by John Calvin (Gootjes 2007, p. 62). Next to that, De Brès occasionally made use of a personal confession by the Genevan Reformer Theodore Beza, published in 1559,

that had immediately become very popular in Reformed circles (Gootjes 2007, pp. 71–72).

In structuring his text, De Brès had followed the Gallican Confession rather than Beza, as is clear right from the beginning. Beza had opened his confession with a discussion of the Trinity in order to then provide chapters on God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. Thus, just like the Apostles' Creed, the structure of Beza's confession was thoroughly trinitarian (Gootjes 2007, p. 73). In composing the Belgic Confession, however, De Brès rather followed the Gallicana in first dealing with the existence and attributes of the one God, then shifting to the doctrine of revelation (expanding this section by adding two Articles), in order to return to the doctrine of God for an exposition on the Trinity only in Article 8. The Gallican Confession, however, had deviated here from the draft that had been provided by Calvin, in which Calvin had started off with an article on revelation and Scripture as the foundation of the Christian faith in order to then continue in the second article with the doctrine of the one and triune God. In fact, the 'greatest change' that the Gallican Confession had made in Calvin's draft had been to split this second article into two parts, moving up the first part (regarding the one God) to the first article while relocating the treatment of the Trinity to the sixth article and squeezing in the doctrine of revelation between these two parts (Gootjes 2007, p. 63). In the Belgic Confession, because of its expansion of the section on revelation, the doctrine of the Trinity would not even be mentioned before Article 8.

This divided way of presenting the Christian doctrine of God ties in with a larger tendency in Western theology that has lately become much regretted. In what has been dubbed the 'trinitarian renaissance' – the 20th-century revival of trinitarian thinking across the board of all Christian denominations (cf. e.g. Kärkkäinen 2009; Schwöbel 1995; Van den Brink 2003) – the traditional Western habit of dealing first with the doctrine of God 'proper' and only subsequently with the Trinity came to be seen as a development that reflected and perpetuated important theological problems. It was Karl Rahner in particular who started to criticise this development, tracing it all the way back to Thomas Aquinas's distinction between the treatises *De Deo uno* and *De Deo trino*. According to Rahner, by treating the doctrine of the Trinity apart from and subsequent to the doctrine of God, it was suggested that 'everything which matters for us in God has already been said in the treatise *On the One God*' (Rahner [1970] 2003, p. 17) so that the doctrine of the Trinity was relegated to a mere appendix. This would mean to ignore its importance for the Christian life and its regulative function in structuring Christian talk about God. Moreover, its treatment almost necessarily becomes abstract, as all that can said about the three divine Persons has to fit in the predetermined oneness,

which requires the use of nonbiblical concepts like subsistence, relations, processions, etc. 'Thus the treatise of the Trinity locks itself in even more splendid isolation, with the ensuing danger that the religious mind finds it devoid of interest' (Rahner [1970] 2003, p. 17).

Indeed, in many confessional texts, the treatment of the Trinity gives the impression of being included for formal reasons, not warming the hearts of many believers or being significant to their spirituality. Rahner suggests that if, following Scripture, we would mean by *theos* first and foremost the Father, the trinitarian composition of the Apostles' Creed would naturally commend itself as the most fitting way to structure our confessions and dogmatic surveys (Rahner [1970] 2003, p. 16). We would then start with speaking of 'him whom Scripture and Jesus himself calls the Father, Jesus' Father, who sends the Son and who gives himself to us in the Spirit' (Rahner [1970] 2003, p. 18), in order to conclude only afterwards that these three must be conceived of as one God. In this way, our treatment of the Trinity would be much more firmly grounded in salvation history and in the Bible, and the tradition's claims about the immanent Trinity ('God in himself') would be much better understood as what they are, namely ontological back-ups of the ways in which the triune God actually encounters us in the economy of salvation. God relates to us in accordance with his innermost being, and thus there is no other God hidden behind his threefold revelation as Father, Son and Spirit.

Though Rahner was writing with an eye on the Roman Catholic Church, his observations have resonated far beyond his own tradition, and indeed Protestants, too, have reason to take them seriously. The Reformers contended that with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, there was no difference *qua* subject matter between them and their Catholic adversaries. Arguably, Articles 8–11 mattered to De Brès most of all because they displayed the profound continuity between the Reformed Reformation and the mother church on such a weighty issue as the doctrine of the Trinity: the Reformed were by no means the innovators that Rome suspected them to be! Jonker (1994, pp. 50, 60–61) points out that the desire to vindicate the Reformed movement as fully Catholic was an important motive behind the entire Belgic Confession, and this is certainly true with regard to its doctrines of God and the Trinity. As a result, just as Aquinas and other scholastics had done, the Belgic Confession starts with a confession of the unity of God ('We all believe […] and confess […] that there is a single and simple spiritual being whom we call God', Art. 1) in order to deal only subsequently with the three distinct Persons of Father, Son and Spirit. Moreover, in doing so it adopts the philosophical conceptuality that had traditionally been used to describe the intra-trinitarian relations, using terms like essence, subsistence, procession, etc. Such concepts cannot be found in the Bible and often stand at a distance

from the church's spirituality and liturgy. Thus, many Reformed confessions and other expositions of Christian doctrine exhibit the same structure that Rahner complained about.

Yet there is another side to this coin, which may have been unduly obscured during the trinitarian renaissance. Whether this was done consciously or not, by starting with the divine unity, common ground was created with adherents of other monotheistic traditions. Of course, when reading the Belgic Confession, non-Christian monotheists such as Jewish and Muslim people would soon (e.g. in Article 4) discover that this confession is incompatible with their own religion. It is by no means the case that the Belgic Confession is glossing over the huge differences between the three great monotheistic traditions. Yet the confession does suggest that there is some common ground to start with. In the case of Judaism, this means that Christians – including Reformed ones – worship the same God as Jewish people, even though they have diverging views of this God's primary locus of revelation (the Torah vs Jesus). In the case of Islam, some Christian theologians argue that here as well, despite huge differences in the way in which God is conceptualised, the word 'Allah' refers to the same being as the Father of Jesus Christ (e.g. Volf 2011); others argue against this view (e.g. Wentsel 2006, pp. I.45; II.551–552) or hold that the issue is largely semantic, depending on one's theory of identity (e.g. Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017, pp. 105–106). Irrespective of one's take on this issue, however, it is in line with the Belgic Confession to highlight that Jewish, Muslim and Christian people have something in common which sets them apart from their secular, agnostic or pluralistic contemporaries: they are *theists*, even *monotheists* – they believe that there is one God and that it is possible to some extent to know this God on the basis of God's revelation (Art. 2). Moreover, they agree about quite a few of this God's properties (eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, etc.); they fear this God, sharing with each other what Calvin called the 'awareness of divinity' (*sensus divinitatis*; Calvin 1960, I.3.1[77]); they worship this God and try to live in accordance with his holy will.[78] Whereas nonbelievers would often find this attitude irrational, theists of different religions agree with each other that God's will outweighs all human rational and autonomous decision-making.

By postponing its treatment of the divine Trinity to a later stage, after first having talked about the one God, the Belgic Confession implicitly

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77. For reasons of compatibility with other editions, I will refer to Calvin's *Institutes* by mentioning the relevant book, chapter and section (§) numbers.

78. A missionary in Malaysia once told me that Malaysians, when having to pass their country's border, can say to each other: 'You don't have to be afraid of this customs officer, he won't overcharge you for he is a God-fearing man' – meaning that the officer was either Christian or Muslim.

acknowledges this common ground that Christians have with other monotheists. Now that in both South Africa and in the West we have entered a stage in which our once-Christian cultures have become deeply pluralistic, the contemporary relevance of the Belgic Confession in this respect can hardly be overstated: even though Christians have fundamental religious disagreements with Muslim and Jewish people, as well as other theists, to begin with they share some crucial common ground in their doctrine of the one God, and in all that this doctrine implies.

But does the 'shelving' of the doctrine of the Trinity that results from the split between Articles 1 and 8 not mean that this doctrine necessarily becomes barren, losing its relevance for the church's life of faith, as Rahner would suspect? In what follows, I will argue that that is not the case (§4). Let us first, however, examine whether the doctrine has a biblical basis (§3).

◼ The Trinity and the Bible

We observed that Reformed Reformers like De Brès adopted the doctrine of the Trinity just as they had inherited it from their predecessors, taking up the philosophical jargon that had been put to use by the fathers of the early church. Yet, there is an important difference between them and their predecessors in the way in which the doctrine of the Trinity was *grounded*. For the Reformers, the tradition (as determined by the fathers, popes, councils, etc.) did not have authority in its own right, but only in so far as its claims could be backed up by Scripture. As a matter of fact, the Belgic Confession had just confessed this in a remarkably clear, even defiant way in Article 7 (Billings 2013):

> Therefore, we must not consider human writings – no matter how holy their authors may have been – equal to the divine writings; nor may we put […] councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else. […] Therefore we reject with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule [*viz. the rule of biblical faith*]. (p. 30)

As a result of this firm *sola Scriptura* stance, the Reformers found themselves confronted with the question of whether the traditional philosophical terminology that had been used to carve out orthodox trinitarian doctrine was in agreement with the Bible. They could no longer just refer to the reverend status of the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, where this doctrine had been established. It is characteristic of the Belgic Confession's Protestant and Reformed character that these councils are only mentioned at the very end of its treatment of the Trinity (see the final lines of Art. 9).

But *could* the classical doctrine of the Trinity be grounded in the biblical Scriptures? In fact, in his earlier years, John Calvin was hesitant about

this question. In particular, he was concerned about the philosophical formulations by means of which the doctrine was forged, formulations involving concepts (like Trinity, essence, Persons, relations and others) that could not be found in the Bible, so that in his view nobody should be urged to endorse them. Indeed, when in 1537 Calvin himself (being only 28 years old at the time), along with his fellow pastors William Farel and Pierre Viret, was urged by Pierre Caroli during a regional synod in Lausanne to subscribe to the early Christian trinitarian formulations, he refused to do so. Initially, Calvin got away with this because he was able to convince the Lausanne synod of his orthodoxy. However, when the issue was tabled again at a subsequent synod (in Bern, 1539), Calvin was taken to task for his reluctance in Lausanne, and now he admitted that the trinitarian concepts that had been coined by the early church were of lasting significance after all. Therefore, even though the 'weak' should not be forced to subscribe to them since they cannot be found in the Bible, the classical expressions deserve universal recognition in the church. It is not clear whether Calvin gave up his previous plea for 'free usage' (*liberum usum*; Herminjard 1965, p. 283) of the classical formulations for pragmatic reasons at that time, but what is clear from his later writings is that over time Calvin became more and more firmly convinced of their indispensability (see Van den Brink 2013, and the literature mentioned there).

Yet Calvin continued to be wary of abstract speculation about the inner dynamics of the Trinity, urging that 'we need not dally over words' in connection with trinitarian doctrine (*Inst*. I.13, 5). Even in 1559, he could still write the following:

> […] I wish they [*the classical trinitarian concepts*] were buried, if only among all men this faith were agreed on: that Father, Son and Spirit are one God, yet the Son is not the Father, nor the Spirit the Son, but they are differentiated by a peculiar quality. (*Inst*. I.13.5) [author's own insertion]

Indeed, Calvin sometimes deliberately added terminology of his own to the classical concepts, as if he wanted to make clear that these are not the only ones to be used. In this way, he employed metaphors like 'source' and 'fountain' for the Father, terms like 'wisdom' and 'counsel' for the Son, and 'power' and 'efficacy' to denote the 'peculiar quality' of the Spirit (*Inst*. I.13, 18). Interestingly, in Article 8, the Belgic Confession uses some of the same terminology (source, wisdom, power) to denote these qualities, and even adopts Calvin's phraseology when stipulating that 'the Father is not the Son', and so on. De Brès may have learned such expressions directly from Calvin while he was in Geneva, but it is more probable that he adopted them from the Gallican Confession – even though neither the Gallican Confession nor Calvin's draft for it contains the characteristic threefold phrase that 'the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, the Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son' (cf. Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 80).

More important here is that Calvin was convinced – as is clear already from the first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) – that *the substance matter* of the doctrine of the Trinity is fully in accordance with the Bible. Now that, given the *sola Scriptura*, an appeal to the patristic tradition (and even to the ecumenical creeds) could no longer suffice, the Reformation was confronted with the task of showing that, even though its classical conceptuality could not be found in the Bible, the doctrine itself was indeed thoroughly implied by the Scriptures. Therefore, Calvin opened his exposition on the Trinity in his 1536 *Institutes* with exegetical observations. In doing so, he could make use of a longstanding medieval tradition, as it had been commonly assumed in the church that (Muller 2003):

> [...] there was a unity of the faith and of the promise of salvation from the beginnings of the biblical narrative, an assumption that included the claim that the fundamental teachings of Christianity were available to the patriarchs. (p. 215)

Thus, it was believed that ancient Judaism was aware of the doctrine of the Trinity on the basis of a number of Old Testament texts, even though it was often acknowledged that it was communicated here less clearly than in the New Testament.

Whereas early Protestant Reformers like Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, Musculus and Vermigli had continued this tradition by repeating even some of the most artificial Old Testament 'proofs of the Trinity' (Merkle 2015, pp. 7–12), it is interesting that Calvin was more critical. Because of his theological preference for the grammatical sense of the text and his admiration of the linguistic acumen of Jewish rabbis, he distanced himself from what he came to see as contrived trinitarian interpretations of Old Testament texts. For example, it was quite common to see a reference to the Trinity in the Hebrew word for God, *Elohim* (which is technically a plural), as it figures right from the beginning of the Bible in Genesis 1:1. As a scholar trained in the humanistic tradition, however, Calvin considered this 'not solid enough a proof' for such an important truth and even warned his readers to beware of such 'violent glosses'. Similarly, he questioned whether the traditional reference to Isaiah 6:3 ('Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts') was adequate as an argument for the Trinity and denied that another classical proof-text for the Trinity, Psalm 33:6, contained a reference to the Holy Spirit (Merkle 2015, pp. 15–16). Yet Calvin remained convinced that the Trinity was revealed already in the Old Testament, supporting especially the trinitarian reading of Genesis 1:26 ('Let us make humankind in our image'). When some Calvinists started to radicalise Calvin's approach, however, and came to deny that the doctrine of the Trinity had any biblical foundation at all, thus moving to the camp of the anti-trinitarians, later Reformed theologians like Zanchi were quick to return to the full series of traditional proofs from the Old Testament, even the ones that clearly presupposed knowledge of the doctrine (Merkle 2015, pp. 68–120).

In light of this, it is interesting to note that De Brès proceeds in Calvin's footsteps in Article 9 by mentioning only one Old Testament text that is considered to lend support to the doctrine of the Trinity: Genesis 1:26 (in combination with Gn 3:22). And even this reference is deemed 'somewhat obscure' as compared to the 'very clear' testimonies from the New Testament. The first New Testament reference is to Christ's baptism in the Jordan (Mt 3:16–17), where Father, Son and Spirit are jointly present in the cooperative event of ushering in Christ's messianic ministry. This event, just like the conception of Jesus, which is quoted next (Lk 1:35), is firmly located in the history of salvation and thus testifies to the primary locus of the doctrine in the economy of salvation rather than in the realm of metaphysics. The text does not tell us much about the ontological unity of the three divine Persons, but it should be read alongside other New Testament texts which strongly suggest that Jesus Christ and the Spirit belong to the divine identity of the God of Israel. Thus, the triadic blessing in 2 Corinthians 13:13, which is also mentioned in Article 9, subtly evokes the image of a threefold divine unity. According to Christoph Schwöbel, such texts, just like Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 8:6, 2 Corinthians 12:4–6 and various passages from the Gospel of John, display a 'proto-trinitarian' pattern of discourse about God (Schwöbel 2009, p. 25). Being related to one of the divine Persons always means being related to the other ones as well, since 'they are distinct identities but nevertheless a differentiated unity' (Schwöbel 2009, p. 28). Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity can be considered a faithful explication, using contemporary thought forms, of this proto-trinitarian grammar of the Bible. In this way, it can still be upheld that the doctrine of the Trinity, as Calvin and other Reformers held, 'provides the necessary "grammar" to speak about the messages of the Scriptures' (Smit 2009, p. 61).

At the same time, and in a sense continuing in the spirit of Calvin, today we tend to be more critical of locating biblical proof for the doctrine of the Trinity in 'a few isolated texts' (Van der Kooi & Van den Brink 2017, p. 86). Indeed, some of the individual texts which Article 9 adduces in support of the doctrine may strike us as less persuasive in light of the results of modern biblical scholarship. For example, the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 is seen by many interpreters as a reflection of the developing baptismal practices in early Christian communities. These communities gradually started to baptise not only in the name of Jesus (Ac 2:38, 10:48, etc.) but to explicitly link Jesus' name in the baptismal formula to the Father and the Spirit (Schwöbel 2009, p. 25). Even so, the Great Commission articulates the divine triunity (perhaps intimating the unity by mentioning the one 'name' in which people have to be baptised) at a very early stage in church history, namely the time in which Matthew wrote his gospel. By contrast, the text that offers by far the clearest formulation of the Trinity by explicitly stipulating that 'these three are one', 1 John 5:7, has been unmasked as a

red herring. It is a very late and intentional insertion into the text of the Greek New Testament, and some contemporary versions of the Belgic Confession (e.g. the one in Billings 2013, p. 33) have therefore deliberately placed it within square brackets. This so-called *comma Johanneum* [Johannine phrase] is only found in four (out of thousands) manuscripts of the Greek New Testament, the oldest of which (Ms 61) was actually composed around 1520, after Erasmus had promised to include the phrase in his edition of the Greek New Testament once a single Greek manuscript could be shown to him that contained it. In response to this challenge, an Oxford friar wrote such a manuscript, translating the phrase from the Latin Vulgate (which had it as a marginal gloss at the first words of the text) into the Greek and including it in 1 John 5:7 (cf. Metzger 1992, pp. 62, 101–102, who calls the phrase 'certainly spurious', 62).

As we have seen, however, the Belgic Confession opens its enumeration of biblical proofs with Genesis 1:26–27, and this is a very interesting text in this regard indeed. The use of the plural in these verses, and especially in 1:26 ('Let *us* make humankind in *our* image'), has intrigued exegetes throughout the centuries, and Christian authors have seen a reference to the Trinity in it from the patristic era onwards (ed. Greenwood 2018, p. 200). Today, biblical scholars prefer other interpretations, arguing that the plural refers to God's heavenly angelic court (which would have the odd implication that humans have also been created in the image of this court!) or functions as a special form of self-address, for example in accordance with the habit of royals at the time. Yet those Christian interpreters who consider it as a special way of divine self-referring do not necessarily dismiss the trinitarian interpretation as misguided. Jack Collins (2006), for example, considers the reference to the Trinity as the *sensus plenior* [fuller sense] of the text:

> If the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is true, then the referent was present in Genesis 1. This is not the same as claiming that the author or a pious Israelite reader must have been able to see it, only that the narration allows it. […] the Spirit of God in Genesis 1:2 is closely associated with God himself in the Old Testament. The Christian doctrine [*of the Trinity*] allows us to make good sense of all the elements in the text, as well as of the elements of other texts. (p. 61)

Thus, even though Genesis 1:26 and 3:22 can no longer be seen as 'proof-texts' for the Trinity in the classical sense, from a Christian theological perspective, we may still think of the Trinity when contemplating the meaning of the first-person plural in them.

This is important, especially in the context of Genesis 1:26–28, since this passage establishes a crucial link between God and humanity. If humans have been created in God's image, and if the plural from a Christian perspective should be read as implying that there is 'a plurality of persons

within the Deity', as Article 8 has it, then somehow humans resemble, or are called to resemble, this plurality-in-unity. That is, the doctrine of the Trinity does not only say something about 'how God is composed', it also has far-reaching implications for the way in which we conceive of humans. The belief that humans have been created in God's image forges a connection between the doctrine of God and theological anthropology (cf. Grenz 2001). And if the God in whose image we have been created is the *triune* God, then we are clearly made to reflect the particularity of God's triune nature too. Intriguingly, and rightly in my view, the Belgic Confession elaborates on this particularity in terms of *relationality*. It sees the plurality and unity of Persons in the divine being reflected in the plurality and unity – or, in one word: the relationality – of the sexes in humankind, as is clear from the fact that it explicitly quotes the follow-up sentence from the Genesis text: 'Indeed, male and female he created them'. Thus, from the perspective of the Belgic Confession at least, it is justified to derive theological and ethical guidelines from the doctrine of the Trinity for how we humans are meant to live and interact as relational beings (cf. Leene 2013, especially pp. 155–158).

This important insight provides a starting point for our attempt to probe the relevance of the Belgic Confession of the triune God for Christians today.

■ The contemporary relevance of the Belgic Confession on the Trinity

In contemporary Anglo-Saxon debates, the trinitarian renaissance, which we mentioned before, has seen a backlash in that some authors have argued against the legitimacy of drawing any implications from the doctrine of the Trinity for human relationships whatsoever. Authors like Steve Holmes and Karen Kilby, for example, have contended in various ways that the doctrine of the Trinity was originally intended as a means to safeguard the unity of God while doing justice to the divinity of both Christ and the Spirit, and therefore it should not be employed to do any other theological work (e.g. Holmes 2012; Kilby 2000). They are especially critical in this regard of so-called social accounts of the Trinity, which derive far-reaching ecclesial and social ramifications from the doctrine.

Now we can readily agree that the doctrine of the Trinity was intended to delineate the mystery of the faith that Jesus Christ and the Spirit belong to the divine nature along with the Father, and yet there is only one God. Indeed, it is important to emphasise that this is the primary function of the doctrine of the Trinity: to help us in believing that Jesus Christ is not some semi-divine figure but, apart from being fully human, also fully God; and to

help us believe that the latter also applies to the Holy Spirit, whereas at the same time there is only one God. If we did not have the doctrine of the Trinity, we would be left with one of three options. Either we would have to believe that there are three gods – in which case we would have fatally lost continuity with the Old Testament and the Jewish religion. Or we would have to see Christ and the Spirit as aspects or modes or appearances of God rather than distinct Persons – which would be at odds with their deeply personal relations in the New Testament. Or we would have to believe that Christ and the Spirit are less than fully divine Persons – in which case our very salvation would be at stake since it is only God who can save us. To be sure, God could save us by using nondivine beings as his instruments. But the New Testament witnesses that Jesus and the Spirit do not form the scaffolding that is removed once they have united us to an unknown God; instead, Jesus Christ and the Spirit show us who God is in God's innermost being. God is definitely infinitely greater than we can fathom, but God is not more aloof than, or otherwise different from, Jesus: the one who has seen Jesus has seen God (Jn 14:9). Similarly, God is no other than the Spirit who searches the depths of God and bestows the gifts of God on us (1 Cor 2:12). In this way, God is savingly revealed to us through Jesus and the Spirit, and since God's revelation is fully trustworthy, God cannot be different than thus revealed – which is to say that Jesus and the Spirit share in the very identity of God.

It is this unique vision which the Belgic Confession wants to uphold against all kinds of detractors – see the 'rogues gallery of trinitarian heretics' (Plantinga 1979, p. 56) at the end of Article 9 – since it had become clear in the early church that even the most subtle deviation from it could easily spoil the good news of the gospel. It is for this reason that after having laid out the doctrine of the Trinity, the Belgic immediately continues to articulate its most important presuppositions: the divinity of Christ (Art. 10) and of the Spirit (Art. 11). Both had been the object of intense spiritual and intellectual struggle in the early church (although the identity of Christ more so than that of the Spirit), and the Belgic just wants us to align ourselves to the outcome of these struggles. Therefore, even though it adds some linguistic embellishments, it basically repeats the traditional language here by stating that Jesus Christ, as the Son of God from all eternity, 'is the true eternal God' who is 'one in essence with the Father' (Art. 10). Similarly, it affirms that the Holy Spirit is 'true and eternal God', 'of one and the same essence, and majesty, and glory, with the Father and the Son' (Art. 11). If one seriously believes these things, and at the same time one is convinced that this God is identical to the one God of the Old Testament, the basic contours of trinitarian doctrine cannot fail to emerge. According to this doctrine, '[t]here are three divine *hypostases* [i.e. identities] that are instantiations of the divine nature: Father, Son and

Holy Spirit' (Holmes 2012, p. 200). As the seal on the biblical message of salvation, this doctrine has been relevant throughout the ages and it continues to be relevant today. And if, as they say, nothing is so practical as a good theory (or doctrine), it is even of *practical* relevance.

Yet, this is not to say, as Holmes and others hold, that the relevance of the doctrine is *restricted to* this function. The Reformed prioritising of Scripture over tradition points in another direction. Whereas the tradition indeed uses the sober (and hardly further explainable) language of *hypostases*, which should not be confused with modern-day persons, the New Testament especially shows us how Jesus and his Father are involved in a profoundly personal relationship. The Holy Spirit as well can be depicted as a divine Person, displaying activities and even emotions (Eph 4:30). Zoutendijk and Dekker (2017) conclude their study of the Holy Spirit in the Bible as follows:

> The Holy Spirit is the Person who is essentially connected to God and Christ, who dwells in the believers and who pushes the world forward through suffering and resistance towards the eschaton. (p. 73; author's own translation)

In the biblical narrative from the Old Testament through Paul and Luke to John, the Spirit increasingly receives personal traits (Zoutendijk & Dekker 2017, p. 73). Even though we should do justice to more impersonal biblical metaphors of the Spirit (the Spirit as a force, etc.), theologically we should start with the more mature thinking on the Spirit in John, where the Spirit appears as 'another Advocate' next to Jesus (Jn 14:15). That means: theologically, we have to start from the profoundly personal character of the relationships between Jesus, his Father and the Spirit as witnessed in the New Testament (but in various ways 'prepared' in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism; cf. Bauckham 1998). It is into this deeply personal and relational communion of Father, Son and Spirit that we sinners are being drawn through grace. We can therefore agree with Cornelius Plantinga's observation: 'A person who extrapolates from Hebrews, Paul and John would naturally develop a social theory of the Trinity' (Plantinga 1989, p. 27). And as he is well aware, Holmes can only maintain his opposite conclusion by downplaying the weight of the New Testament (Holmes 2012, p. 199; cf. for more on this Van den Brink 2014).

It is not without reason that the Belgic Confession, like other Reformed sources, goes to quite some length to root the doctrine of the Trinity in the biblical testimony. As is clear from Article 9, the Old Testament is not obscured from view in this connection, but the New Testament is receiving pride of place as the fulfilment of God's covenant with his people. Indeed, the way in which Jesus and the Spirit share in the worship and identity of the God of Israel in the New Testament is normative for Christians and has always been at the root of attempts to formulate trinitarian doctrine.

Thus, from a Reformed perspective as well, the economy of salvation as witnessed in the New Testament should be the starting point of the doctrine – and Reformed accounts of the doctrine have indeed tended to stress its soteriological significance. For example, the full divinity of both Christ and the Spirit is seen as highlighting the absolute priority of divine grace in our redemption (Schwöbel 1993). Conversely, following Calvin, Reformed theologians have often eschewed all 'idle speculation' with regard to the Trinity that was *not* intrinsically connected to soteriology. Smit (2009) therefore identifies as a second characteristic of Reformed accounts of the Trinity (next to their biblical orientation) that their interest:

> [...] lies elsewhere than the inner-trinitarian discussions of the early church, that the biblical grammar leads (them) to a different kind of trinitarian language; namely, confessing the actions of the *living* God. (p. 66)

That is why Calvin preferred notions like source, wisdom and power, which recur in Article 8, to the more abstract traditional concepts that only apply to the intra-trinitarian relations, such as unbegottenness, generation and procession. In the Belgic Confession as well, the doctrine of the Trinity is put to use to underline who the living God as revealed in the history of salvation is for us, with us and in us as Father, Son and Spirit.

Yet it is not just the doctrine's soteriological significance that is to be highlighted from a Reformed perspective. There is another, even more practical side to it as well. Dirkie Smit has rightly pointed out that Reformed theology tends to reject 'the conviction represented by Kant and even in the Reformed family by Schleiermacher, that the doctrine of the Trinity does not have any practical use' (Smit 2009, p. 75). The recent trinitarian renaissance, on the other hand, has delivered many proposals and suggestions for teasing out the practical and moral implications of the doctrine, not all of which have been equally convincing. In the realm of ecclesiology, for example, contrasting conclusions have been drawn from the doctrine of the Trinity by Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, who based a strongly hierarchical episcopalianism on it, and Free Church theologian Miroslav Volf, who has argued that the doctrine gives rise to a congregationalist church polity (see Volf 1998; Zizioulas 1985). Sometimes, one can hardly escape the impression that theologians have come to justify all sorts of ecclesial and political causes – be it feminism, anti-feminism, socialism, acceptance of children at the Lord's table, rejecting the use of national flags in church buildings or even polyphony and plurality in general (cf. Cunningham 1998) – by deriving them from the doctrine of the Trinity, whereas in fact they cherished such causes all along. Reformed theology is critical of such ideological abuses of the faith. We should be cautious here so as to not read back our own preferences into the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

Perhaps we should return to our confession to find out what exactly *are* the doctrine's further practical implications. There is one small line in Article 8 in particular which gives us an important clue in this regard: the line which states that 'all these are equal'. Indeed, in the divine being 'there is neither a first nor a last'. The original French has: '*tous trois sont d'eternité egale* [...] *Il n'y a premier, ni dernier: car tous trois sont un*' (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 80). The history of the doctrine of the Trinity, to be sure, has seen protracted debates on the question of whether, and if so in which way, the Persons of the Trinity are equal indeed. In particular, subordinationism – the view that the Son and the Spirit are ontologically subordinate and in that sense unequal to the Father – was widespread among Christians before the settlement of the Christological and trinitarian debates at the fourth-century ecumenical councils of Nicaea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD). At these councils, the famous word *homoousion* (of one substance) was used to counter not only the blatant subordinationism of Arius and his followers, but also its more subtle forms that could be found in the work of church fathers like Tertullian and Origen.

Yet subordinationism continued to be a temptation with which the church had to deal time and again. Interestingly, in Calvin's time it surfaced again in a subtle form, and most probably it is here that the background of the emphasis on the equality of the divine Persons in Article 8 is to be found. In a polemical debate with some Italian anti-trinitarians at the end of his life, Calvin took issue with the view that the Son receives his divine substance from the Father (see Baars 2004, pp. 230–269; Ellis 2012). The notion in the Constantinopolitan Creed that the Son is 'God from God' was interpreted in this way by Valentine Gentile, a classicist who belonged to the Italian refugee congregation in Geneva. In response, Calvin made a distinction between the way in which the Son is *a Patre* (from the Father), namely as the second Person of the Trinity (and this is meant by the credal phrase 'God from God'), and the way in which the Son is *a se ipso* (from himself), namely with regard to his divine being. Similarly, the eternal generation of the Son concerns his hypostatic (i.e. 'personal') nature, not his divine essence. Calvin argued in this connection that Christ is *autotheos* [God-self] and can be addressed by the name Jehovah – expressions that raised eyebrows even with those who fully endorsed classical trinitarianism. Calvin, however, by all means wanted to prevent the suggestion that Christ possesses a slightly smaller or inferior part of the divine substance than the Father, and instead defended the full equality of both, which he also extended to the Holy Spirit. There is no higher and lower part in God, because that would imply that there are semi-deities in God, which would tear apart the one divine being. Thus, despite his reticence to probe the mysterious depths of the immanent Trinity, the full ontological equality of Father and Son was of crucial importance to Calvin.

Although not all of his followers adopted Calvin's view (Ellis 2012, p. 167), the proximity of the Belgic Confession to Calvin is close enough to take its assertion of the eternal equality of the trinitarian Persons as intentional. Now if we recall the Belgic Confession's insistence that Genesis 1:26–28 should be interpreted along trinitarian lines, it is not far-fetched to conclude that we humans are called to reflect this full equality of Father, Son and Spirit in our own relationships. For as we saw, being created in the image of God implies being created in the image of the Trinity. Thus, if the Trinity is a unity in diversity of fully equal Persons, this has consequences for the way in which we conceive of humankind. Here we can indeed draw lines from this very heart of Christian doctrine to visions of the church and of society. Indeed, it has often been argued that the Reformed Reformation stimulated more egalitarian forms of church polity (by including lay elders and deacons in their consistories) as well as more democratic forms of state governance. Even though such connections have been qualified in recent historical scholarship (cf. Höpfl & Van den Brink 2014), this does not detract from their theological legitimacy. Indeed, if there is no higher and lower in the being of God, and if we have been created in the image of God, how could there possibly any higher and lower among human beings (cf. Vorster 2011, pp. 21–23, 105–128)? Needless to say, this view has far-reaching consequences for our ecclesial, economic and even socio-political views and behaviours, both in the context of present-day South Africa and beyond, even though opinions differ as to how exactly these consequences should be teased out.

For example, it seems natural to induce the diversity but full equality of men and women from the unity-in-diversity of the divine Persons. Yet it has been argued that such a view does not exclude the subordination of wives to their husbands, since the full equality of the trinitarian Persons does not exclude the subordination of the Son to the Father. Wayne Grudem, for example, holds that the Father possesses 'a leadership role among the members of the Trinity' which gives him greater authority than the Son and the Spirit (Grudem 1994, p. 459). Since they reflect God's image, men and women should display similar patterns of hierarchical distinction in their relationships – with men obviously reflecting the Father and women mirroring the role of the Son.

Such a construal, however, raises many questions. Firstly, the subordination of the Son is only attested in the Bible with regard to Jesus' earthly ministry as a temporary event in the history of salvation (see Phlp 2:6, 7). Secondly, it is counterbalanced by texts on Jesus' being given all authority by the Father (Mt 28:18, Eph 1:22, Phlp 2:9), which he will return again to the Father in the eschaton (1 Cor 15:28) – so there is an ongoing mutuality in the Father and Son's giving authority and glory to each other (see also Jn 17:1–5). Thirdly, how can justice be done to the doctrine of the

Trinity when we neglect the Holy Spirit? It is the third Person of the Trinity who by his sheer presence in the divine being prevents us from deriving dualistic patterns of thinking from the doctrine of the Trinity. But fourthly, and perhaps foremost, how is it possible that after so many centuries during which the church has consistently fought and rejected subordinationism in trinitarian thinking, it once again raises its head, even in orthodox Christian circles? Grudem is keen enough to restrict the Son's subordination to his function or role and not to extend it to his divine being, but that unduly separates the one divine being in which 'all are equal', from the three Persons who allegedly are hierarchically ordered (cf. Leene 2013, pp. 87–95; see MacGregor 2020, pp. 248–257 for an overview of the debate). Most probably, Calvin would sense another subtle attempt here to detract from the full equality of Father and Son.

Thus, even though we have to be cautious in teasing out the anthropological implications of the equality of Father, Son and Spirit, it is clear that in Reformed theology, this confession should be taken very seriously. Today it may mean that the perichoretic mutuality of self-giving love that constitutes the communion and being of Father, Son and Spirit is an indictment of all sorts of structural and systemic inequality in human communities. Especially in church communities, the moving prayer of the Lord Jesus should be taken to heart (Jn 17):

> […] that they [*i.e. those who believe in Jesus*] may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (v. 21)

Interestingly, Jesus does not pray that his followers relate to each other *as* he relates to the Father, but that they may come to share *in* the communion of the Father and the Son. It is from the very heart of the Christian faith as communion with the triune God that we come to participate in – rather than just imitate – the divine unity-in-diversity in which 'all these are equal'.

■ Conclusion

Let me, by way of conclusion, summarise the main findings of this chapter. We first explored the way in which its confession of the Trinity in Articles 8–11 is embedded in the overall scheme of the Belgic Confession. This led us to the observation that the Belgic Confession, deviating from Calvin in this respect, has followed the age-old tradition of discussing the doctrine of God ['theology proper', or the treatise *de Deo uno*] prior to, and separate from, the doctrine of the Trinity. In the wake of Karl Rahner's criticism of this tradition, we realised that this separation comes with the risk of belittling the regulative function of trinitarian discourse in Christian theology. Yet we found out that another reading is possible, according to

which by placing the doctrine of the one God up front, the Belgic Confession firstly aligns itself with all those who believe in this one God. In today's pluralistic societies, this may remind us of the fact that Christians have something in common with adherents of other monotheistic traditions, such as Jewish and Muslim people, a deep-seated feeling of awe and reverence to the Most High which they do not share with their secular or agnostic contemporaries. Despite the many huge and tragic differences that separate today's Jewish, Christian and Muslim believers, they all know about our calling to love, worship and serve the one Creator God of all.

Secondly, we discovered that the Belgic Confession follows the Reformed pattern of showing a special interest in the biblical backgrounds of trinitarian doctrine. Initially there were doubts in the Reformed Reformation about the scriptural legitimacy of the traditional formulations with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, but John Calvin soon became convinced of their substantial correctness, even though he continued to qualify the monopoly of the technical concepts and formulations and did not adopt all biblical proof-texts that had been adduced in the tradition. Examining the various biblical passages that are appealed to in Article 9 as biblical support for the doctrine, we found that not all of these are equally convincing, but some are, and the biblical case for the doctrine can certainly be made if we do not limit our attention to isolated 'proof-texts'. Instead, we should extend it to what has been called the 'proto-trinitarian grammar' that is pervasive in the biblical writings (including the Old Testament; cf. Huijgen 2017). We gave special attention to the only Old Testament text referred to by the Belgic Confession in this connection, Genesis 1:26–28, and concluded that we have sound reason to side with the Belgic Confession that, from a Christian perspective, it is indeed the *triune* God in whose image we have been created.

This led us, thirdly, to an assessment of the practical relevance of the Belgic Confession of the Trinity. Since nothing is so practical as to know how to be saved, we first situated this relevance in the realm of soteriology. Perhaps in Reformed accounts even more than in some others, the doctrine of the Trinity functions as a warrant of our redemption, since it is only God who can save us by his sheer grace – which means that Christ and the Spirit are no extensions of our human possibilities or achievements but fully belong to the realm of God (salvation coming to us top-down rather than bottom-up). In the second place, over against some critics of this move, we argued that the Belgic Confession of the Trinity also has practical relevance for our manifold inter-human relationships, both in the church community and beyond. In particular, we focused on the Belgic Confession's affirmation that the three divine Persons 'are all equal', and teased out the consequences of this affirmation for those who have been created in this God's image.

Even though we had to tread cautiously here, so as to avoid reading ideological preferences of our own back into the doctrine of the Trinity, we concluded that this perfect equality is an indictment of all sorts of structural inequality in church and society. This should therefore stimulate us to pursue another way of living together, a way that shows what it means to participate in God's communion in which, in the midst of their diversity, all persons are equal.

Unassailable faith statements encompassing creation, providence, humanity and fall, original sin: The Belgic Confession Articles 12–15

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I have come from the City of Destruction and am going to Mount Zion. (Bunyan 2007, p. 55)

■ Introduction

The intellectual development of theology during the Reformation led to the early formulation of confessions and catechisms – not new dogma, but catholic dogma, as reflected in the early ecumenical councils, purposefully framed with a polemic nuance.[79] While the capture of these doctrinal truths

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79. This differs from the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), emphasising instruction of the Christian faith.

did not claim to exhaust biblical teaching, the formulations expressed in the Belgic Confession of 1561 regarding Articles 12–15, the creation of all things, God's holy will, the creation and the fall of humanity and original sin have stood the test of time. For these reasons, this brief excursion into the traditional understanding and usefulness of this confession and these articles will lead into their contemporary relevance for the present, beyond being of mere historical interest.

It should be remembered that although Articles 12–15 are confessionally accepted in an ecumenical sense by the Reformed Protestant community, they nevertheless are sometimes variously questioned by the wider Christian community.[80] Generally, the contentions seem to be from the perspective that these theological articles are formulated polemically giving a sense of theological finality. This approach gives little theological or doctrinal wiggle-room for latitude by faith-based Christian denominations when they seek to claim credibility for differing theological positions and interpretations engaging with the same or similar biblically formulated articles of faith.[81]

◼ How Articles 12–15 fit into the rest of the Belgic Confession

Here, we explore the flow of the thought process which led Guido de Brès to formulate one article of the confession after another.[82] This will centre Articles 12–15 contextually. To that end, we need to start with the original purpose of the Belgic Confession.

This confession explained and articulated various biblical teachings, evidencing an uncompromising reliance on the veracity of Scripture – a risky claim and position to maintain. The dominant faith of the time, Roman Catholicism, would most certainly take issue with much of the doctrinal content and the polemic framing of the Belgic Confession, not least Articles 12–15. Therefore, the confession's petitioners stated clearly that they would resist unto death rather than deny the biblical truths

80. Strauss (1993, p. 506) is of the opinion that 'the Belgic Confession is not only overall Protestant but is particularly Calvinist in nature'.

81. See, for instance, the debate around the Belhar Confession of 1986 (Van Niekerk 1986), which pleads for its elevation to acceptance together with the three traditional formularies of the Dutch Reformed Church. Thus, beyond being a policy document, his key argument is not doctrine but the language used to frame the Belhar Confession, which reflects interpretatively on Scripture. This in no way negates the significance of that document, but in this writer's opinion, the sociolinguistic blended hermeneutic employed does not justify a claim to fundamental confessional status.

82. Gootjes (2007, pp. 89–90) shows Beza's French Confession's (1559) unmistakable influence. Janssen (2016, p. 48) opines that Articles 12–15 must be read dialectically.

expressed in the confession. Together with thousands of others, De Brès sealed his living faith in 1567.

Within the Belgic Confession, we meet the logical progression of one article of faith following another. Articles 1 and 2 establish the biblical teaching about God, followed by stating the only reliable source for such knowledge, the Bible, in Articles 3–7. These articles express a view of the compendium of books which comprise the Bible, comprehending the revelation of God[83] and the basis for establishing doctrinal authority and sufficiency, distinguishing it from extrabiblical sources. Clearly, the Church of Rome would here contest the exclusive statements of the Belgic Confession that show little regard for the apocrypha and inherited ecclesial authority. This stance claims a base of authority for denominational confession, which is latitudinally wider than that for Reformed theology.

Having established the source of the Belgic Confession's doctrinal statements, Articles 6 and 7 elucidate the unique source of the Bible. The Bible alone reveals that which God alone can reveal, in this instance, the Trinity (Arts. 8 and 9) – truths which set the Bible apart from any other claimed Scripture sources. Articles 10 and 11 immediately point to the previous articles, which established biblical teaching about God the Father. An unfolding of the trinitarian doctrine of God now develops the doctrinal teaching of the deity of the other two distinct Persons of the Trinity, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Herein lies the foundation of all that will now follow in De Brès's formulation of the Belgic Confession, in particular Articles 12–15, the subject of this paper. Articles 16–26 expand on the doctrine of salvation that develops from the previous articles, as stated above. Salvation is key to an understanding of the Catholic Church. The unmistakable identity of the church and its role in the light of process is captured in Articles 27–32. Articles 33–35 elucidate the unique symbolism employed by the church, while Article 36 serves to guide the church in its engagement with civil government. The final article, Article 37, concludes where the first article began, with God and his eternal relationship with all of creation and its created reality.[84]

■ The importance of Articles 1–11 for understanding Articles 12–15

De Brès established and identified the particular identity of God himself in Articles 1 and 8–11 as that being whom we believe in and confess.

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83. There is an unmistakable association here with the French Confession's Articles 3–7.

84. Traditionally, creation would be encapsulated by 'the heaven(s) and the earth' (Gn 1:2). Although not exclusively, I defer to using the term 'created reality' as the former, because of the material interpretation that relegates all content, regardless of complexity, to physical substance.

This knowledge is unique to the Bible. It alone further develops the revelation of God and its understanding to allow for apprehension through human finiteness of comprehension in the light of created reality. Revelation cancels any confusion based on a variety of views on the plurality and divisibility of the fullness and complexity of created reality with the God of the Bible.

This immediately questions an understanding of reality or of God as deity when one ventures beyond the pages of biblical revelation. For that reason, De Brès now leads the reader into contemplating creation in a comprehensive sense, as captured in Article 12. Its purpose? Article 13 formulates the sovereign providential purposes of God with and within that same creation, which is further understood in terms of the fall (dealt with in Art. 14, the dilemma of a spoilt creation). A crucial insight follows in Article 15 in dealing with the extent of the human fall into sin and its effect upon the whole of creation – indeed, the whole of the complexity of created reality.

These articles serve not only as the background for the rest of the articles but also to reveal the work of the triune Godhead in the whole of creation and its history. For the further development of the articles of the Belgic Confession, the principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fidei* undergird statements about Jesus Christ and the work of salvation, the classical highpoints of Reformed confessions of the 16th century.[85]

We now focus our attention on Articles 12–15.

■ Articles 12–15: Contemporary or tradition?

There are those who would settle the Belgic Confession and similar confessions and catechisms into their historical contexts and see them mainly as documents of historical interest with some degree of relevance for the present. I suggest a far more disturbing reason. It is my opinion that the majority attitude to these historical documents is that they are simply ignored when it comes to their catholic use in the present because of the ascendency and domination of a material view[86] of the world – a view that simply ignores any religious interpretation other than its own.

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85. Dreyer (1997, p. 1217) shows that the Belgic Confession's formulations pertain to various historic Christian faith expressions.

86. I employ 'material view' as representative of a variety of views which express a-theistic scientific views and claim chaos and chance explain all of reality. A paradigmatic view would, for instance, make the resurrection of Jesus possible in a chance universe as a once-off occurrence. In my opinion, this transcends a naturalistic view that affirms a single order of reality with object and event happening in space-time. Both views claim self-sufficient reasons for existence (cf. Janssen 2016, pp. 54–56).

More recently, the theological shift from neglect of catechetical and confessional instruction led to selective confessional and catechetical referencing, by and large paying lip service to these historic doctrinal statements. Without terms of biblical reference for theologians, clergy and congregations, the door opens to the temptation to consider outright attempts at reinterpretation of its catholic doctrines, shifting from conclusive dogmatic formulations into theological positions employing a new take on interpretation. In this manner, a new juxtaposed hermeneutic came about, claiming equal confessional[87] validity for its interpretation of the classical Reformed doctrines.

Sadly, the ramifications of such an attitude debilitate the church, and in particular Reformed congregations, where this is prevalent. To relegate the Belgic Confession's present-day relevance relative to its historical context in this manner is to jeopardise the appreciation of doctrinal truths so succinctly and clearly stated. True, the issues of yesterday may not be those facing congregations today, but the truth encapsulated by the articles is timeless. It is this interplay of the traditional appreciation of the Belgic Confession and its contemporary place which will now be explored.

What ruins the paradigm of a material perception of the totality of reality are the church and Christians who take God's revelation seriously (Strauss 1993, p. 501). While a secular or material paradigm does not entertain the spiritual beyond a material interpretation, this immediately questions the limitations of this paradigmatic worldview. All that gives meaning to human beings and the world is seen as being within the confines of the rational, its authenticity based solely on material categories. Reasoned from this perspective, scientific knowledge becomes the only credible source for verification within a defined naturalistic paradigm. Relegating the existence of a transcendental realm beyond categories of rationality fails to consider the intertwining of all of reality.

Not unexpectedly, it is the biblical paradigm, governed by doctrinal principles, that questions a material worldview governing this paradigm and any other paradigm removed from God's special revelation. Perspectives centred in the biblical knowledge of God, creation, providence and original sin are cardinal if the church is to deal with questions such as: What is the

87. Janssen insightfully, and rightly so, continually reminds his readers that the articles deal with theological confession, which formulate insights based on special revelation (2016). On the other hand, Smit (2012) escapes particular confessional commitment by contextualising the Belgic Confession and claiming the same for its present use. Rauhauss (2009) argues for a *status confessionis* by association of its ethical value.

meaning of life? What is wrong with this world? Do we have free will? This leads to the exploration of these doctrines,[88] as framed in Articles 12–15.

■ Article 12: The creation[89] of all things
□ A general traditional view: Created reality and its continuation

Traditional theology affirms that God may be truly known from his revelation in Scripture. Once God's identity, work and person are made as clear as possible from that theological claim (Janssen 2016, p. 49), then the goodness and fullness of his created works are more clearly and easily understood. God's works suggest the moment when time began as the key reference point of the framework of creation (Beets 1929, p. 100). Time did not exist before God's acts of creation, and this sets it aside from every other cosmogony. There are incredible surprises in store for the person who knows the God of the Bible when it comes to the act of creation, its continuation and beyond, towards eschatological completion.

Accompanying the understanding of God as Creator and his works of creation, as stated in this article, is an awe (Ps 19:1–6) of this God who stands alone. It is suggestive of a creator; even non-Christians may admit that. The contention, generally, is the issue of the identity of that Creator. Articles 1–11 leave us in no doubt as to his identity: it is God, so meticulously introduced in these articles framing the biblical self-revelation of deity. God may be known, not simply inferred from created reality[90] but from revelation. God created because he wanted to, not because he needed to. To state this more explicitly, that the origin and actuality of all things which came into existence as the fullness of reality originated 'from nothing, by the Word – that is to say, by the Son' is not to read a dubious church perspective. Which it would be, except for the fact that God, the God the Belgic Confession so carefully introduced to us from the context of Articles 1–11, that he alone is the Creator of all things. This is then further reinforced in dealing with the complexity of the totality of created reality as the whole of the Belgic Confession is read.

Nor does it come as a surprise that this same Creator's infinite power, evident in the word 'creation' as 'creation out of nothing' [*ex nihilo*] (2 Mac 7:28), infused all of creation with all that it needs to express the providence of his own good will and purposes. God, the source of goodness, did not

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88. 'Fortunately, the Belgic Confession does not present a theological inspiration theory! [...I]t simply confesses the faith of Christians of all ages that the Bible is the Word of God' (Strauss 1993, p. 510).

89. Janssen (2016, p. 50) submits 'by the Word – that is by the Son'.

90. Attempting to establish a natural theology.

create reality in the form of material neutrality so that it has no immediate relation to himself. In fact, he pronounced the successive acts of creation as 'good',[91] an attribution that does not allow for any part of material or spiritual creation to be divinised (Heyns 1988, pp. 108–109). There is no 'nature' independent of its Creator and no reason to claim some form of autonomous brute factuality separate from God. Nor can creation claim a blending or independence of matter and spirit to serve claims of spirituality, which find their object in anything other than God the Creator and his set, intentional purpose for creation. Through the Creator's speech-act, the church confesses that all of reality stands in a particular relation to God, a timeless relation within its historical unfolding and material and spiritual complexity.

For that reason, the act of creation establishes an irreversible direction from God to the origin of something not confused with God as Creator. The Hebrew word *bara* [create or creating][92] suggests the coming into being of what did not previously exist through the Divine speech-act encapsulated in the Word (Jn 1:3). The source particularity of God's Word became the environment for creation in all its fragility and complexity and ensured its ongoing relational existence to God through the Son. For that reason, 'creation' also presents the good God as being continually involved in sustaining and governing of his good creation, the extent of which extends to a fullness of reality discerned to be diverse and populated by unique creatures, seen and unseen. Understanding of creation is enhanced through recognising the pattern of creation as the order of things created. Within that order, the creation of living things came about. Foundational biblical cosmogony is herewith established. For that reason, it leans toward the doxological, a paradigm permeated with hints of scientific possibilities for observation and understanding.

This leads to the question: For what purpose did God create?[93] An association may be made with the role of the Holy Spirit (Gn 1:2), present from the beginning of creation. In the light of serving God through having his creation entrusted to human beings, there is an established contextual relationship between God, humanity and creatures, and with the biotic world[94] (Gn 1:26, 29–30). Its sufficiency and excellence are reflected in

91. 'Good' and 'bad' are matters of opinion, not based on science. For that reason, in a material reality, the words are meaningless. See Van Rooyen (1948, pp. 96–97, 100) and also his emphasis on '*Hy (Jesus) is ook die Middelaar van die grootse skeppingswerk*' and the Spirit.

92. Although the definite article is not in the original, it is implied.

93. A variety of interpretations may be mooted, as diverse as, for instance, Van Rooyen (1948, p. 100) and Beets (1929, p. 1010).

94. See Heyns (1988, pp. 105–108) for the creation and the biotic.

God's pronouncement of good, the unique biblical perspective of religion. This identifies the primary relationship between God the Creator and humanity and captures the act of creation, associating it with an intended continuing reality which would unfold historically in the light of service and servanthood – a relationship which would reflect God's mandate 'that they may serve man, in order that man may serve God'. With the emphasis on God's mandate to serve, the perception of humankind's stamping its dominance upon creation is dismissed. Humankind's continuation of service is in the sense of kingly rule of that which the Creator had created, which he continues to sustain and which he entrusted to humankind.

Within De Brès's understanding of the totality of created reality is a focus on its dimensional inclusion of the spiritual. Beyond the material, God reveals the existence of the spiritual realm populated by spiritual beings called 'angels or messengers'.[95] De Brès extrapolates from the orderly way God created material creation to reveal a focus on the big picture of God's sovereign purpose. As with the material creation, God always deals in a sovereign manner with his sustained spiritual creation.

☐ *A glimpse into the entirety of created reality: Angels and the spiritual realms*

Within the spiritual realm, angels and the heavenly realms reveal the bigger picture of similar continued existence in utter dependence on the sovereign Creator. It seems evident that this realm and its population are not directly associated with a 6-day chronology of the creation account of Genesis 1. From Job 38:7, we learn that the angels witnessed the creation of the material realm that ultimately formed the visible heavens and the earth.

Outside of the immediacy of the Bible's particular revelation, there are numerous extrabiblical references to diverse spiritual beings created. These include references to some beings inclined to good, others to evil,[96] who often hold some sway over individuals. De Brès makes clear that angelic beings are distinguished from humans and from the creation of the earth, including its diverse creatures. Outside of the counsel of God, there is no determining of timing of the events and acts of creation of the heavens and the earth, nor is there a full understanding of the relationship to God of these morally endowed, individuated spiritual beings who are able to engage in reasoning.

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95. For various titles of angels see for instance Job 1:6–8; Psalms 89:6, 8; Daniel 4:13, Luke 1:19, 26; Hebrews 1:14.

96. Created, though with the possibility to fall into sin (Beets 1929, p. 104), compare Heyns (1988, p. 115) on *non posse non peccare* and *non posse peccare*.

The Belgic Confession reveals the inescapable fact that some angels are elect[97] and some, having once been good angels, have fallen into a state so corrupt, as aptly stated in the Belgic Confession, 'that they are the enemies of God and of everything good'. De Brès is careful to equate the angelic fall to an actual post-creation happening, the numbers of whom are fixed. While the elect angels continue as God's messengers and servants, the fallen angels pursue the destruction of all of God's works. Their powerful actions are revealed to include diverse stratagems for ruining the church and God's good creation. Nevertheless, they consciously pursue these ends to their peril, knowing the inevitability of their sure end, the consignment to eternal damnation. Sometimes, claims are made that angels may appear within the material realm in anthropomorphic form[98] and that evil spirits may inhabit animals or human individuals in the sense of possession. To that end, this article is very useful. It reveals the inescapable fact that some angels are elect and some, having once been good angels, have fallen into a state of irreversible corruption. There is little confusion in biblical discernment.

While De Brès makes sure that the enemy of God is clearly identified and distinct from his elect, he does not explore this further. This omission must not be equated to the error of the Sadducees (BC 150–70 AD), who denied the very existence of spirits and so had to deny the machinations of the evil one. On the other hand, the Manicheans, while not denying the same, attributed their existence to self-origination within a dual reality of light and darkness. This sect did not explain the immense battle after Genesis 3 but followed an elaborate romantic approach to the battle between light and dark.

■ Article 13: The doctrine of God's providence
□ A general traditional view

Having established the angelic fall in the heavens and that some angels are totally consumed by evil as opposed to the elect angels, De Brès must now address this matter in relation to God, as presented in Articles 1–11. For it is the transcendent and immanent God[99] who purposes the totality of reality, transcendent and material, in continual engagement with creation.

97. 'Guido de Brès does not follow Beza in repeatedly giving prominence to God's counsel and election […] a difference in emphasis not in theological position' (Gootjes 2007, p. 91). Election later became one of the five articles of the Remonstrance of 1610.

98. In the Qu'ran, Surah Fatir 35:1 claims wings in addition to the anthropomorphic appearance of an angel and its size. A biblical distinction between angels exists in, for instance, the roles and appearances of cherubim (cf. Gn 3:24, Ezk 10:1–22; see the imagery of Ex 25:17–21; and the seraphim cf. Is 6:1–7, Nm 21:4–9).

99. Janssen (2016, pp. 52–53) deals with the associative paradox.

The background to a biblical perception of the fall of humanity is elaborated upon in Article 14. It was Calvin who associated the doctrines of creation and providence: 'For unless we pass on to His providence […] we do not yet properly grasp what it means to say: "God is Creator"'.[100]

What becomes clear, however, from both Articles 13 and 14, is that De Brès's confessional approach is to express as fully as possible what may be known from the Scriptures about God, humankind and the consequences of the angelic fall. He does so without transgressing into the realms of speculation and superstition. To that end, he admits an incomplete understanding that 'surpasses human understanding and is beyond our ability to comprehend', a statement that applies equally to the fall of humanity. So it must apply to make sense of natural hazards, inexplicable human cruelty, plagues and ecological abuse, all of which are sometimes lumped under the so-called 'problem of evil'.

Through insightfully shifting the focus onto the sovereign God and his continual providence and government, De Brès expands the flow of the argument of the Belgic Confession. He does so by developing, from the locus of a very good creation – the work of a good God – to an eventual fall into sin, the backdrop to grappling with the paradox of the fuller comprehension of creation and providence in relation to the Creator God, whose almighty power remains unchallenged. Creation is not an end in itself; it is forever sustained by the good Creator who pronounced it into being. For that reason, the meaning and purpose of all acts of creation by God can only be sensibly seen from within the confines of God's involvement.[101] It is God who interprets his own engagement with his works of creation. This is equally so when it comes to our understanding of his providence[102]. It is a doctrine that is to be believed wholeheartedly because history is not cyclical but determined towards the end ordained by God.

Providentia[103] implies anticipating what lies ahead and to do so knowledgably, as implied by the Greek word *pronoia*. Providence encapsulates the multiplicity of God's works and continued engagement with and within his creation. De Brès confidently implies that not only does the triune Godhead see, but he knows the state of the totality of his creation in both perfection and fall. God's providence includes the sense of 'to care

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100. Calvin's *Inst*. I.16.1, p. 197. This article develops from the Geneva Confession of 1536 (Gootjes 2007, p. 81).

101. Not God cooperating with humanity, but humanity serving in obedience to God.

102. The Synod of Dort (1618–1619), among others, condemned the remonstrant view pertaining to the Calvinistic doctrine of God's providence. Though the Latin text of the BC was officially approved on 30 April 1619, it was never officially ratified (Gootjes 2007, p. 158).

103. Providence, an extrabiblical word, nevertheless expresses the totality of who God is in continued dynamic relation to creation (Van Rooyen 1948, p. 107).

for' regardless of the state of his creation. Providence, in a biblical sense, yields to nothing and nobody. It is God the Creator and Sustainer in control of the governance of his completed creation and its continued orderly existence, even when fallen.

Having established this, De Brès is immediately intentional in establishing the boundaries of our human understanding so as to avoid speculation leading to human fabrications such as the idealisms of abandon (e.g. scientism) or constricted and limited views (e.g. legalisms). God the Creator ever reigns alone with the Holy Spirit and the Son without compromise and does so justly, without humankind necessarily comprehending his inscrutable ways. By implication, this suggests sovereign rule constricting humankind, who continually attempt to supplant God's governance. Alternately, humanity continues to attribute favourable circumstances or desired outcomes to chance and fortune.[104] To that end, the pervasiveness of sin is recognised as having infected both the spiritual and material realms and their creaturely inhabitants, an approach which immediately cancels any thoughts of an abandoned creation. This is the big picture.

Within this picture, as revealed to us by God, it is unthinkable to associate the Holy God in any way with sin, the origins of which remain a mystery. What is clear, however, is that God's power and goodness underlie his just judgements and continued providential rule.[105] But it at once brings about the solemn fact of creaturely accountability for having fallen into sin and continuing in it. Despite the ravages of sin and the overwhelming consummation of evil, the same power and goodness of God are graciously expressed to us in his 'fatherly care', analogous to the care of God for his creation and its creatures, 'which gives us unspeakable comfort'. God is ever in providential control (Mt 10:30, 31). As succinctly stated in the Westminster Larger Catechism:[106] God's works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful, preserving and governing of all his creatures, ordering them and all their actions to his own glory.

Despite sin, God's control of creation expresses the dynamic manifestation of an interaction of evident and dormant created possibilities. For that reason, providence is closely linked to creation and predestination,[107] expressed in manifest ways within the continuance of created reality. Creatures may adapt to the environment; deserts may form in former lush

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104. Van Rooyen (1948, p. 109) illustrates this from Psalm 73.

105. Beets (1929, p. 108) distinguishes between God-ordained and God-maintained laws and seeks to preserve God as primal cause.

106. Westminster Larger Catechism QA 18 and in Beeke and Ferguson (1999, p. 41).

107. To take this association lightly is to risk a lapse into deism.

geographical regions. Whatever changes may take place, these express the fuller latitudinal possibilities latent in God's creation. No change to anything in creation – however dynamic, for the better or worse, not even when sin brings about a gross abandonment of his justice and destruction of his good work – is ever outside the scope of God's providence. Nor can any interpretation of the dynamism of a sinful creation and humankind ever lead to an independence from God as Creator (Rm 11:36). Regardless of any tendency toward some elevation of implied goodness or natural majesty, nature is never ideally glorified as Nature.[108] There is no independence from its Creator. Creation forever remains God's (cf. Ps 19:1–6, 29, 65, etc.).

God's purpose for all created reality means that all of existence is purposefully driven by God to an end eternally determined and in part revealed to humankind by him.[109] The triune God engages providentially and eternally with his created beings, thus embracing the fullest perception of the worst of humankind's history. For that reason, De Brès leads his readers into the following for consideration.

Both elect and non-elect angels and humankind represent the single purpose of God, implying, for that reason, that he is in complete control of the material and spiritual, despite the natural and spiritual powers unleashed, whether in unconscious or deliberate attempts to thwart his good purposes, 'even when the devils and wicked men act unjustly'. For that reason, there is a deliberate check[110] from God upon all material and spiritual powers.

It is of great comfort to us to know that while devils and enemies may rage, the sovereign boundaries established through God's providential rule curb their influence and effect. This is manifestly evident in how humanity responds to God's influence through the work of his Spirit and through the Word of God to bring about God's purposes. Despite the masses of humankind, whether nations, groups or individuals, who live as if independent of the Sovereign God, it is God who brings about his purposes with fatherly care, regardless of whether they are conscious of that or not in their decisions and behaviour. By the same token, his people, regardless of their activities, are sovereignly kept through the providential sufficiency of his permission and will. For these reasons, Christ's disciples rest contentedly in their trust in the 'just judgements of God', relying on understanding available to them from the sufficiency of God's revelation to them without allowing speculation to lead them into the unknown. To that

108. Scientism is consequential to such a view.

109. To that end, God's immanence and transcendence may be discussed (cf. Potgieter 2002).

110. Restraint, preservation, permission, causal, etc.

end, they are comforted in knowing that even the hairs on their heads are numbered, as are the birds of the air, sheltered within the fatherly care of God's providential will – a care extending to the limits of the machinations of their demonic and human enemies.

De Brès then issues a stern warning to those who confess the Christian faith to 'reject the damnable error of the Epicureans who say that God involves himself in nothing and leaves everything to chance'. To ignore or make light of providence is to enter a theological drift to distance God from creation.[111] This warning turned out to be prophetic as deism arose. While confessing deity and ascribing creation to deity, the emergence of opposing views suggesting the absence or removal of deity from creation came about, which allowed for interpretations of chaos, chance and luck. Deity was eventually supplanted through its demise and eventual removal to give natural credence to Darwin's speculative evolutionary theory. Today, the outflow of this is determinism, mooted within its own set boundaries. Within this paradigm, everything is left to chance to develop a reality of an idealistic material interpretation. More recently, Van den Brink (2020) developed this, making the case for theistic evolution in a scholarly manner. While the Reformed position emphasises God acting in history, Van den Brink deftly synergises the matters of an evolutionary history of creation and the fall to include and focus on covenantal and cosmic implications.

◼ Article 14: The creation and fall of humanity[112]
☐ A general traditional view

De Brès, having established the providence of God, now develops those parameters to embrace a fuller biblical comprehension of the former and present state of creation and of mankind. To that end, both creation and mankind are juxtaposed and put into perspective in Article 14.[113]

De Brès does so by initially stating that humanity is created 'from the dust of the earth'. Humanity is never removed from material creation and the fullness of created reality. They are 'embodied' and good, not imprisoned (Janssen 2016, p. 56). Any perspective of humanity in relation

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111. A distance evident in relegating God's presence to the poetic. See, for instance, Psalm 29 – the consequences of God's presence in thunder and lightning v. 5 and more. A poetic interpretation of God's actual presence.

112. 'The opening sentence of article 14 sets up the drama for the remainder of the confession' (Janssen 2016, p. 57).

113. While it developed Article 9 of the French Confession, its theological formulation was questioned by the Remonstrance document of 1610, objecting that it does not allow for part attribution of human will in matters of faith and conversion (Gootjes 2007, pp. 137–138).

to God proceeds from this basis and the fact that this dust was formed and made by God. God shaped it into his image as the triune Creator God (Gn 1:26).[114] Created and shaped, humanity is to serve the Creator God, creature and human culminating in purposeful relationship with one another and with the earth. Service, in its diverse forms, was an ability that humankind[115] and, to an extent, other creatures had. That represented the creaturely completeness of this world's creation God spoke into existence. But it was human beings who were aware of their honour and excellence.

Furthermore, humanity, compounded as male and female, was not the purpose of creation, discussed in Article 12. Humankind was created as the crown of God's creation (Ps 8:5; 1 Pt 3:15) in the form of a unique material and spiritual composite being. For that reason, the human being is not weighed down or imprisoned by a physical body and limited lifespan. This, in essence, is the basis of biblical anthropology reflective of God's revelation, as comprehensively recorded in both the Old and the New Testaments.[116]

Humanity's unique creation[117] allowed them to serve God adequately and obediently while relationally fulfilling the mandate entrusted to them.[118] The complex compound of spirit, reason and morality also established their potential accountability to God, to one another and to creation itself. Humanity's very creation enabled them to thoughtfully consider knowledge, morally distinguish between right and wrong and thus be aware of their continued physical and spiritual relationship to their Creator, whose image they reflected. Whereas human beings were created in the complexity of God's image, they were made[119] as relational beings. Pertaining to that creation, both to their created humanness and to this narrower meaning which set them apart from all other creaturely beings, they were originally imbued with the ability to have true knowledge and the 'will to conform in all things to God's will', reflective of, for instance, God's goodness as formulated in Article 1. Submission to God's will, which continually expresses his perfect knowledge and character, sustained the first man as he obeyed the 'commandment of life which he had received'. This was, firstly, reflected in his primary obedient relation to and dependence on

114. Commentators may differ about whom God is addressing.

115. Priestly service (Janssen 2016, p. 59).

116. See Heyns (1988, pp. 119–143) for the Afrikaans *totale blik* [complete or total view] approach to anthropology.

117. Van Rooyen (1948, pp. 115–117), in particular, develops the concept of 'soul' as the core concept of the *imago Dei*.

118. Heyns (1988) elaborates extensively on this. Beets (1929, p. 117) relates the commandment of life to probation in the sense of a trial command.

119. 'Made' and 'formed' complement one another, and instead of focusing on subtle differences, it is proposed that the unmistakable meaning is clear in this instance.

God and, secondly, his relationship of engagement with and dependence on creation (Gn 1:29) – made possible by virtue of his image-bearing ability in fulfilling his mandate on Earth.

Militating against subjection to the Creator and persuaded by the devil, the first man willingly overstepped the boundaries set by God (Gn 2:16, 27) into sin[120]. While 'lending his ear to the word of the devil' sounds antiquated, it graphically illustrates and conveys the willingness of human beings to consider the devil in conversation. Human sin is not fate.

As all created reality responded to the nature of its creation, so humanity was to respond in kind. Consequently, God's punishment ordained death (Gn 2:17) and a curse (Gn 3:14ff.), which effectively ruined present and future humanity, physically and spiritually. Both Adam and Eve were indelibly ruined and reflected the sinful independence of human nature for succeeding generations. Having entered into that corruption, humanity lost the excellence to serve God but for 'small traces [*vestigia*] which are enough to make [them] inexcusable'.[121] There remains, for instance, a continued desire for right and the recognition of wrong, a continual but fruitless search for truth and meaning. But this must be qualified. All *vestigia*, without exception, suffered irremediable corruption. Despite the fall, the human being, now in darkness, remains the created creature in which the destroyed humanness and shattered image of God remain. Although they are destroyed, it is God who purposefully maintains a relationship with humankind and not man's volition.

Whereas the origin of sin is not revealed, its presence on Earth is not the result of its earthly creation or origin (Heyns 1988, p. 165). A former fall into sin had already taken place in the heavens – the presence of the snake in the garden – confirming that enmity with God already existed. Nothing, however, negates the responsibility of both man and woman in their wilful disobedience to God.

Sin brought about a new relationship between God and humanity and with creation. Humanity's comprehension of creation and the Creator since then is now viewed from the perspective of darkness and the connotations associated with that metaphor.[122] Symbolism represents the actuality of this inclusion within the human state. Humanity is unable to escape the consequences of their fall into sin, and thus the suggestion of fallen humanity being free to choose cannot be substantiated. Humankind

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120. The historical origins of sin remain unknown and did not originate with Adam and Eve (Heyns 1988, p. 165).

121. Von Rad in Koopmans (1939, p. 92, fn. 1) opines that the image of God is not central to the witness of the Old Testament. Other religions also claim some form of divine image.

122. Metaphor signifying absence, evil, ignorance, compounded in humanity's fallen state.

became and remained a slave to sin, unable to escape its shackles and so gain the favour of God, evidential of humanity's continued failure to engage with God relationally. The extent of the capture of man in sin extends to any salvific relationship with God, unless drawn by the Father.

De Brès makes clear that humanity has nothing to boast about. There is no degree to claim to soften the evil consequences of the fall into sin. Humankind is totally polluted. It is a fall of separation, not only away from God but without ever recovering their previous relationship with God and created reality, including fellow human beings. Whatever may be claimed to nullify the sinful nature of humanity, whose mind is at enmity with God, must be seen in the light of the gospel – God, in Christ, reaching out to human beings. To claim God is at work is to centre the focus on Christ.

De Brès develops this slavery to sin. What may be claimed for humanity at enmity with God? This is further enhanced by the four questions in Article 14:

For who can boast of being able to do anything good by himself?

Who can glory in his own will?

Who can speak of his own knowledge?

Who can produce a single thought?

The answers to these questions are succinct but conclusive, and in summary state that the human being, without God, is nothing but a 'slave to sin', incapable of being objective, which leads them to make the wrong choices regarding fellow human beings, the world and finally God. At most, they can make a distinction within a fallen world of the degree of evil in choices between good and bad. However excellent a choice might be, it is made and executed without ever attaining God's perfect will. While choices and values may vary as a result of cultural differences, lifestyle and beliefs, personal choice is merely a degree of evil intent. In short, humanity has nothing to boast about.

On the other hand, however, whatever thoughts and actions a person may have that reflect the work of God, these are the consequence of Christ within to will and to do, according to his good pleasure. 'Without me, you can do nothing'.

The total extent of the fall into sin includes the historical set number of fallen angels.[123]

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123. Heyns (1988, pp. 166–169, cf. 113–115, Art. 13) develops the doctrine of angelology, although it is not the specific focus of Article 14.

De Brès does not mention Pelagius (c. 354–420 AD) and the opposition of Augustine of Hippo to spurious views on free will and untainted human nature. As in previous articles, this controversy could have served as a timely warning against ignoring the dire consequences of the fall into sin. Nor is there any mention of Rome's claims of vestigial remainders of God's image that may lead to pleasing God.[124]

■ Article 15: The doctrine of original sin[125]
□ A general traditional view[126]

With the foundation of the excellence of Adam the man and his subsequent fall established, De Brès now focuses the attention on more fully understanding the total immersion of mankind into sin, for 'sin is the transgression of the law' (1 Jn 3:4). What is done is done, a deed so heinous it is in totality irreversible. Reaching far beyond the individual, it is a deed with cosmic consequences. Nor can there be misinterpretation as to God's continuing intended goodness, resulting in an interpretation of an impotent but benevolent deity. It is further important to understand that this article is not primarily about baptism,[127] but the lasting and damming consequences of sin and sinful deeds, the continued effect of mankind's desire to escape God's rule through the Word.

Without exception, the whole of humanity is historically subjected to the same degree of corruption as Adam was and shares in the same guilt,[128] a reality and potential that accompanies and is imputed upon every depraved human being and so validates the condemnation of the human race.

Humanity, created in God's image, had the freedom to voluntarily obey God's command not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gn 2:17). Hence, it was a command instituted to indicate man's freedom (Gn 2:15) but also to institute restriction upon his freedom as a creature of God. This command was accompanied by an undeniable caution of

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124. Van Bruggen (1980, pp. 75, 78–79) claims that this article is not about baptism.

125. Heyns (1988, p. 164) deals with the overlap of the doctrines of Articles 14 and 15.

126. Koopmans (1939, p. 99) '*De leer van de erfzonde is een van de hardste en onverzettelijkste stukken van de christelijke leer*'. Not surprisingly, several changes were made to this article at the Synod of Antwerp (1566), but these 'did not substantially alter the meaning of Art. 15' (Gootjes 2007, p. 125). 'So God speaks to us […] for our own good. This is the "gospel" of sin' (Janssen 2016, pp. 61, 63).

127. Compare Article 34 dealing with the outward baptism with water. Van Rooyen (1948, pp. 125–126) examines this article's historical discourse and Beets's (1929, pp. 128–129) in relation to Article 34.

128. Beets (1929, p. 123) qualifies this by distinguishing between *erfzonde* [inherited sin] and original sin.

consequence, should the command of God be transgressed.[129] Sin led to entry into the kingdom of death, the total separation of humanity from God. By implication, the whole of humankind, which traces its lineage to Adam, the original representative of fallen humankind, shares in his choice. This is not fate but transgression of God's command. Any attempt to breach this separation was and is doomed to failure. Humanity cannot reach God, no matter their attempts (Gn 8:21). Or, as attested to in the history of humankind (Gn 6:5), one may note the endless continuation of conflicts and wars, moral depravity, exploitation of the weak, the failures of innate aspirations and beliefs of 'what could be' and of 'what should be'. Despite the best intentions and improvements, whatever the project, political ideology or scientific discovery, the world does not seem to change course for the better. Nevertheless, Calvin did recognise that humankind, at times, is capable of great good.[130] Yet the reasons for such degrees of good continue to reflect the corruption and fallowness of the human heart, thus continuing the separation from God, claiming independent authority of good and evil.

Sin remains indelibly intertwined in the history of humankind. Its proclivity is evident in every fibre of the fabric of societal and personal relationships and finally in death (Rm 5:12). Adam's choice distanced him from God so that in Adam, his biological offspring follow suit. They do so by their own volition and continue to share in the further punishment meted out by God to Adam and to Eve and the serpent (Gn 3:14–19). But it also manifests in humankind's spiritual desires, leading to the creating of false gods and worship of demons. For that reason, De Brès expands on his insights into the separation from God as a result of inherited sin.

Nothing eradicates this condemnation of humankind's inheritance of sin unto death, nor their pollution – not even baptism, more fully dealt with in Article 34.[131] Here, De Brès makes a distinction by shifting the focus to the ongoing purpose of God for this world, putting paid to any view of God abandoning it.[132] During what may be termed as despair at the plight of humankind, De Brès destroys any Stoic acceptance of fate. Christian faith is not fatalistic. Evil was not ingrained into God's creative activity, nor is the

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129. It is dealt with as God against sin, later evident in the gospels (Heyns 1988, p. 165).

130. Vorster (2015) insightfully deals with the matter of human sinfulness, assessing total depravity ontologically from a creaturely and psychological level and God's perspective. The continued value of humankind is developed by Janssen (2016, pp. 63–64).

131. This article has undergone some rephrasing, more fully elucidated in Article 34.

132. See the contentment of De Brès in his letter of comfort to his distressed and despondent wife Catherine Ramon and their five children. He emphasises God's sovereignty and divine wisdom in the face of imminent death without recourse to rancour (Bredenhof 2008).

existence of humankind reduced to God's failure. God is in control, not sin, evident in God's plan of redemption, the reality of forgiveness and release 'from the "body of this death"'.

This is particularly stated in the light of understanding God's providence and continuing consequences of the fall. While De Brès does not compromise on the fall and original sin [*peccatum originale*], he does distinguish between the shared effects of sin as originated by the fall and the inherited sin and guilt imputed from generation to generation upon all humankind, including God's children. Elaborating on the providence of God, the article states unequivocally that although the children of God, regardless of age, share in the inheritance of original sin (Ps 51:5), they do not share in its imputation unto condemnation. Nothing in all of human cultural or societal construction can account for this understanding of the relationship with God on his terms, because it must be viewed through the lens of God's forgiveness based on grace and mercy, the revelation of God. Assurance lies in the finished work of Jesus Christ, in whose victory they share and in whose house they will one day dwell and where their journey will finally end.

Yet this does not mean that believers escape the consequences of sin (Ezk 18:20), but they take refuge in the hope that accompanies the longing 'to be set free from the "body of this death"'. Clearly, this also has implications for children born to God's children. These will be later expanded upon in Article 34, while Article 24 will reflect on taking on full responsible action in the light of him who 'works in us both to will and do according to His good pleasure'.

In spite of the seriousness of this doctrine, there are the anti-Augustinian views of the Pelagians. Their view is that sin is a matter of imitation and is seen because of inheritance through the spurious examples of parents or persons from whom a child takes its cue. Pelagius (390–418 AD), an ascetic, highly educated scholar of both Greek and Latin and a master of Paul's writings, does not deny the reality of sin; in fact, he strenuously opposed sin but denied original sin. He stressed that 'since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory',[133] as he taught that God gave individuals free choice. The issue was about inherited original sin, not just evidential resistance to sin. Semi-Pelagians and Socinians reinterpreted original sin to be viewed as a corruptive force which, although having polluted the will, still allows the possibility through the prevenient grace of deciding for God. This grace, it is said, is from God, allowing for the individual to take a first step towards God; thus, a free choice for God. A Roman

133. From a letter from Pelagius to the nun Demetrias (Brown 2000, p. 342).

Catholic response to the sacrament of baptism, which reflects on the presence of a *gratia infusai*, minimises the veracity of the doctrine of original sin and its consequences. Against the above, Augustine's view of the permanence of original sin and its consequences served as a bulwark against these heresies and represented the teaching of the Bible on the matter of original sin.

■ General reflection of the application and continued validity of Articles 12–15

■ Establishing the credibility of Articles 12–15

There is no doubt that the dogmatic content of these articles has stood the test of time since their formulation in 1561 and presentation to King Philip II the following year. Also, their firm polemic formulations have since found acceptance among Reformed Protestant denominations. No major theological reinterpretations or adjustments of Articles 12–15 have emanated from them since their formulation. Where there have been adjustments, they continue to serve to guide the theological stance of Reformed Christians, far from being a Panglossian parody. Nevertheless, when these dogmatic formulations are viewed from outside the Reformed biblical paradigm, questionable interpretations may well allow for such theological shifts.

Since their formulation, these articles were used to combat erroneous views and spurious formulations of dogma. Historically, the Belgic Confession articles, however, always presented the challenge to anyone who questioned their formulation to present a superior interpretation of the Bible to reflect biblical truths. Despite attempts to do so, this has not taken place. For that reason, an alternative manner of claiming biblical authenticity for beliefs had to be found.

This came about through a long and winding road. I merely highlight some of the historic meanderings: German higher criticism; the historical Jesus; the panentheistic views of process theology; the dilution of the veracity of the biblical canon and its content; the use of extrabiblical sources to supplement or challenge canonical sources (Potgieter 2002). In addition, the ascendency of a material worldview prevailing in Europe and the West and wherever Western values impact countries and communities. Buying into a material worldview serves to isolate church statements to select communities of believers. In particular, the Belgic Confession of Faith may thus become merely a document of some historical interest. This also brought about a challenge for those who continue to hold selectively to some semblance of biblical truth within their own prevailing material *cum* theological, religious or spiritual worldviews.

Two associated approaches to metaphysical statements and claims came about – in the first approach, they are consciously ignored as nonconsequential, being without any scientific validation. The second approach resulted in attempts to preserve some obscure semblance of religious, supernatural or metaphysical claims but now within the locus of a material framework. I briefly discuss the latter approach, as this is the more immediate theological challenge that the church faces.

The ascendency of a material view brought about the realisation that to challenge theology's dogmatic statements of, for instance, Articles 12–15 would necessitate a new positional hermeneutic. The statements of these articles have proven dogmatically sound, as formulated by De Brès. Let me explain.

By shifting the position of a dogmatic statement, say that of original sin of Article 15, into an arena other than dogmatic theology, then that would seemingly allow for a slight nuance pertaining to that specific doctrine. Should the shift, for instance, be into pastoral theology, then the following: if pastoral theology[134] is to take on the role of formulating its own dogmatic statements, then, clearly, the hermeneutic used would differ from a pure dogmatic formulation. Traditionally, pastoral theology would accept scholarly dogmatic formulations. Within its own discipline, it would then pastorally apply a matter such as the original sin of Article 15 in counselling, bringing to bear the weight of its own scholarship. This would be done without adjusting a dogmatic formulation or watering it down to accommodate a more acceptable interpretation of the reasons governing the failure of, for instance, both individuals and society.

The same applies when missiology, for instance, ventures to formulate dogma to reflect an all-inclusive biblical agenda of the salvation of sinners. And so the list may go on.

What must also be considered is the availability of information to a degree never before experienced. In addition, there are higher levels of education in the West and on a more global scale, wherever Western material values have permeated society. The manner and degree of theological engagement may reductively include elaborating on material principles and presuppositions (Potgieter 2002). Often, such opposing definitive views are so deeply entrenched that they conclude in alternate worldviews. By and large, the arena in which dogmatic engagements take place – and for that reason, often taking on a polemic approach – is one in which the Belgic Confession may serve adequately. But the question to be

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134. This illustration pertains to an autonomous position that elevates the individual theological doctrine to claim its own authority to interpret Scripture, allowing for the subtle choice to ignore, sideline or reinterpret theological doctrines and formulate them uniquely for their own use.

addressed is how Articles 12–15 fit into prevailing worldviews, in particular the material worldview. The ensuing comments explore some select views from those already elaborated in Articles 12–15.

These are representative reflections, not exhaustive, and merely state views they represent without analysis. A study for later.

☐ The material question of the creation of all things, as opposed to Article 12

There is no doubt that the prevailing view of the creation of all things, as reflected in scientific publications, reflects a material view of creation as historical gestalt. Reduction of God has gone beyond the God-of-the-gaps, Unmoved Mover or Supreme Being. There is no sufficient material explanation for accepting God or deity unless deity is reinterpreted to fit into a reductionist material view. Dynamic explanations for the origin of the universe are continually in the making and being tested for scientific validation within the material paradigm.[135] Reduction to formula and reasoned speculation allows for continued intentional extrapolation with the understanding that the next theory could supersede any present theory. Within the ambit of these reductions, there is no place for a spirit world outside of the human psyche and mind, nor does the universe display anything beyond a present material determination within chaos and chance, a superseding of, for instance, most if not all religious claims.

☐ The material question of continuation of all things, as opposed to Article 13

When faced with the Spinozan choice of '*Deus sive Natura*',[136] the sorry figure of an impeded god of process theology readily emerges, a god with some resemblance to the God of Israel, which has found wide acceptance, especially within more scientific-*cum*-philosophical religious views.[137] This view has found further expression in the exploration of trying to establish a process theism[138] which expresses select views of Holocaust or Shoah theology. The claim is that the immanence and

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135. I use 'paradigm' conveniently, aware of the differing views postulated for the dynamic advancement of material science.

136. God or nature. God of Nature (cf. Blackburn 2016, pp. 197–899).

137. See, for instance, the degrees of process deity (Potgieter 2013).

138. I merely focus on panentheism (Potgieter 2002), not pantheism and other religions.

transcendence of deity may account for views which claim that God was not absent from the Holocaust camps. This god of process stood by in a helpless manner, limited in actual involvement in the misery and atrocities perpetrated.

Physical scientists[139] who hold to Christian views have found the panentheistic ideas of process theology appealing. Philosophically, they seem to find some fit in prevailing scientific material interpretations of present reality and its continued existence. But the deity of process theology is a far cry from the dogmatic statements of dynamism in Article 13. Panentheism allows for the immanence and the transcendence of its god in dynamic tension.

Relief of humanity's global struggles is centred on the hope of continual development of material scientific insights and advancements in technology. Material accountability seems to be closely related to crisis and management, such as the continued abuse of the world's resources. Concerns and measures are being considered to address dire ecological concerns such as plastic and chemical pollution, changing weather patterns, depletion of oceans as food sources and abuse of natural resources. Some comfort may be advocated for in the belief that the process God is patiently guiding the universe through will lead to some final conclusion.

☐ The material question of origin – Humankind and malfunction as opposed to Article 14

The ascendency of humanity was unquestionably one of the glories of a material worldview. Science initially centred humans cosmologically and then decentred them. Presently, they are relegated to mere figures within the wider biotic and physical reality of an extended universe. Evolutionary advancement is said to mainly account for biological progress. Whatever impediments humankind suffers, such as spurious theistic notions, are seen as vestiges gradually disappearing with the continued advancement of their organic substance. For that reason, any question regarding matters such as 'sin', 'curse' and 'darkness' as referred to in Article 14, are foreign to an elevated and idealistic material view of humankind on an evolutionary journey.

Neuroscience may explain much of the past evolutionary inheritance of humanity's fears in the continual process of survival. God was a necessary

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139. See the writings of John Polkinghorne and Arthur Peacocke.

crutch that was developed, but he is now postulated as a concept, outdated and nonessential for continual evolvement.

In short, this material worldview, which dominates communities associated with Western values, has succeeded in removing Christian theology from any serious scientific consideration. Its scientific method questions metaphysical claims to the extent that humans are viewed in the same light as any other creature that evolved. For these reasons, debate on metaphysical issues is regarded as pointless.

☐ The material question of innate failure as opposed to Article 15

The general societal measure of humanity is in terms of progress and degrees of success. Failure – even worse, innate failure – is touted as a challenge to successfully create or recreate oneself into the person one wishes to be. It is a failure to stop trying. Values associated with success are the benchmark for peer or societal recognition.[140]

Societal measures include instruments. These, for instance, gauge poverty levels, management of resources and financial aid. Instruments fail to explain innate failure, levels of incompetency or miscarriages of justice. In spite of education, financial aid and the best efforts made to combat these, they continue. Failure relegated to the addressing of these issues relies heavily on, for instance, theories developed by social sciences and psychology, material theories which pursue correction without consideration of sin.

■ A brief theologically based assessment

Here, I briefly summarise the challenges that a prevailing material worldview must face if it is to eclipse the biblical view of God and creation. Clearly, these comments and observations are not exhaustive, merely representative. For that, in this instance, it must fully negate the theological dogmatic insights of Articles 12–15. An eclipse must satisfactorily include an address of the fullness of existing reality and its complexities as dealt with by the Belgic Confession. Anything less will be deemed failure. The onus to convince the Reformed church that the Belgic Confession and, in particular, Articles 1–15 are outmoded and thus irrelevant lies with proponents of a material worldview. The confessing church has set forth its case and has yet to yield.

140. Recognition extends beyond mere personal success. Global success is increasingly measured in dealing with city pollution, plastic waste, and so on.

The challenge for a material interpretation of reality and of material creation is indisputably related to the interpretative reality humanity inhabits. Humankind's perceptions are undeniably impacted by the fact of knowability. That they are moral beings able to discern process and value in discerning right and wrong, accompanied by a sense of justice and selfhood, needs satisfactory explanation. In addition, they can discern beauty, truth, value and goodness, all of which govern how they act and expect others to. It is, in essence, presenting a satisfactory Christian landscape of reality.

There is a wider reality than the material view of a material anthropic universe[141] and its consonance that attributes, among others, explanation to chaos and chance. Despite obscuring glaring failures to satisfactorily explain additional issues such as order, morality, goodness, pain and suffering and failure to provide complete answers, it fails to address the 'senselessness' of these matters. For all of these cohere within the person, regardless of whether that person is regarded as a biochemical compound or just a compound of atoms – in a nutshell, reflecting both failure and good. For this latter reason, the Bible alone offers a satisfactory interpretation of matters of reality, creation and the experiential.[142]

In my opinion, apologetics has succeeded in establishing that when it, for instance, questions evolution as theory.[143] The apologetic approach is not to discredit Darwin as a person or as a scientist. In fact, many Christians admire Darwin's boldness and painstaking piecing together of information to eventually conclude with his famous theory. Theorising guesswork in science is not about right and wrong. To establish a theory's worth means that it continues to serve as the best explanation possible while continually being subjected to rigorous investigation in the light of new data. It is thus that serious Christian scholars debate apologetically and argue for reasonable consideration of an alternate view(s), as part of the Belgic Confession is the renewal of all things and salvation of persons, evidently good and bad.

The Belgic Confession does not present this simply as opinion; it is the only solution. Fundamental to this premise is that God created purposefully. God's conclusion for the universe, this world and all of reality lies hidden within the final return of Jesus Christ. Violation of this assumption is to challenge the triune God and his purposes for human beings and the world they inhabit. In brief, then, no questions of a metaphysical nature ought to be avoided.

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141. Compare the distinct positioning of 'assimilists' and 'consonantists' (Polkinghorne 1998, p. 86).

142. See, for example, the origin and ecclesial use of phrases such as *nadere reformatie* [further reformation] and *semper reformanda* [always reforming] (Clark 2014).

143. There is no doubt that many accept evolution as having progressed beyond theory, enjoying the scientific status of fact (cf. Van den Brink 2020).

With Christology, everything is at stake: Insights from the Belgic Confession Articles 16–19

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■ Introduction

This chapter will focus on Articles 16–19 of the Belgic Confession, which deals mainly with Christology, which is God's revelation in Christ, but in some sense also the position of humanity as elected in Christ.

Reformed theology accepts that God ultimately revealed himself through Jesus Christ, and that we can never truly know God in isolation from Christ (Jn 14:6). In a certain sense, it is Christology that unlocks theology (Van Wyk 1995, p. 246), or in another sense, the gospel is the key that unlocks the rest of the Bible.

The gospel has everything to do with Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ we get to know who God is and what he intends to do. Throughout the Bible, God reveals who he is, but it is especially within the gospel that he

reveals what he is doing through Christ. In Articles 16–19 of the Belgic Confession, we reach the centre or crux of the divine inspiration. As we confess our understanding of Christ, we do it within the theological setting of the Belgic Confession, namely, who God is with regard to our salvation.

Although the Belgic Confession's Article 16 lies more within the dogmatic scope of the doctrine of God and God's decrees, it provides the pretext to the person and work of Christ, as confessed in Articles 17–19 (and even 20–21, which fall outside the scope of this chapter). God's divine election of his children can ultimately not be fully understood without a correct view of who Christ is and what God does in and through him.

In Articles 16–19, the spotlight falls on the person and work of Christ, and it will become clear that a correct understanding (read: confession) of these truths is ultimately the divine key to fully understanding the nature, magnitude and extent of God's revelatory dealings with his creation, especially humankind, with regard to the salvation of his elected children. The confession about Christ in Articles 16–19 also provides a clear and functional apologetic framework against specific heresies, namely Pelagianism, Arminianism and Docetism and the way in which these figure today.

Although the above-mentioned heresies were theological issues that mainly have their roots in the 16th and 17th centuries, the remnants of these teachings still echo today and remain points of serious contention. Some examples are God's election without any contribution of human beings, as found in the teachings of mainly the Pentecostal movement(s), and the divinity of Christ, which is more and more doubted as a result of the theological views of, *inter alia*, the Jesus Seminar in the United States of America (USA) and the New Reformation in the Republic of South Africa (RSA).

■ Prolegomena of Belgic Confession Articles 16–19

■ 'To believe' and 'to confess'

It is noticeable that the Belgic Confession departs from the singular of the professed and moves to the plural: 'we believe' (cf. also the original texts in Bakhuizen van den Brink 1940). Booyens (1974, p. 21) explains the common character of the Belgic Confession in light of 2 Corinthians 4:13, which reads: 'I believed, therefore I spoke […] and we believe, therefore we also speak'. Throughout the 37 articles of the Belgic Confession, this opening phrase echoes, with the exception of a few (Art. 2: 'We know'; Art. 3: 'We confess'; Art. 4: 'We take […] together'; Art. 5: 'We accept'; Art. 6:

'We discern'; Art. 9: 'We know'; Art. 18: 'We confess'). In this plural form, the voice of the single confessor is no longer heard (cf. the *Apostolicum*) but rather a chorus of voices from the church of Christ.

The essence of a confession is to give expression to what is believed. In this sense, a confession is a summary of the faith; in other words, it is an outline of matters that underlie the faith. The repetition of the 'we believe' formula confirms this character of the Belgic Confession. There are some exceptions to the introductory formula 'we believe', and these deserve some further comments.

'To believe' and 'to confess' as introductory phrases need elucidation. In religious terms, the activity of confession is the expression of the content of the faith (cf. Janse van Rensburg 1991, pp. 164–165). Romans 10:10 supports this inference: 'With the heart we believe [...] and with the mouth we confess'. Faith and confession are two sides of the same coin. In this respect, it is by no means strange that two of the articles of the Belgic Confession deviate from the 'we believe' formula and the words 'we confess' were used instead. The content of the two articles in question, where 'we confess' instead of 'we believe' was used, would not have looked any different if the 'we believe' formula were also applied in these cases.

It seems that the deviations in the opening formulas of Articles 4–6 do not detract from the conviction that wants to be expressed in these articles. In all three of these cases, the content of the relevant articles appears to be the determining factor for their introductory formulas.

The remaining two articles that deviate from the 'we believe' introductory formula, Articles 2 and 9, draw a connection between faith on the one hand and the conviction it creates in the heart on the other hand. The introductory formulas of these two articles shed light on the essence of the faith, namely that its authors, and everyone who professes it, have knowledge (Art. 2) and knowledge (Art. 9) regarding what is believed, which otherwise would not be feasible.

The faith that is believed in the heart and confessed with the mouth, through which the essence of the biblical message can be summarised, which is accepted as the framework within which the life of the believer finds its progress, and which serves as a distinguishing instrument, is the same faith that offers the one who professes it the certainty of what is professed.

■ Calvin's Christological views and influence on the Belgic Confession

Without repeating from previous chapters the context of the origin of the Belgic Confession with reference to the different versions, it will be

necessary to point out certain aspects that have a direct bearing on the Christology in the Belgic Confession.

Hofmeyr and Van Niekerk (1987, p. 1) point to the very prominent role of Calvin in the drafting of the Belgic Confession. The Belgic Confession was not an entirely original effort by De Brès, but according to Hofmeyr and Van Niekerk it is based on a document that was already drawn up by Calvin in 1559. Contact and collaboration between De Brès and Calvin took place between 1556 and 1559 when De Brès, as a refugee, was taught in Geneva by Calvin and Beza (Hofmeyr & Van Niekerk 1987, p. 5). Bosman (1987, p. 46) is convinced that, if it is kept in mind that Calvin provided a concept on the basis of which the Belgic Confession was drawn up, an informative comparison can be made between Calvin's Christology and the Belgic Confession.

For Calvin, in contrast with Luther's[144] soteriological Christology, the emphasis is on Christ, who reveals the counsel and the mystery of God. In this, Calvin agrees with Lord's Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism, in which it is confessed that Christ as the supreme prophet and teacher 'made known to us the hidden counsel and will of God regarding our salvation in full' (cf. De Groot 1931, p. 99). Comments on the Christology of Calvin must therefore always be understood within the framework of Calvin's intent not to view the *soli Deo gloria* and the *solus Christus* at the expense of each other (Coetzee 1972, p. 118).

Calvin views God's act in and through Christ as the central salvational event, and around this centre the entire Scripture is structured (Coetzee 1972, p. 92). Christ as the centre of the Scriptural revelation is accepted and applied by Calvin on the basis of the revelation-historical Scriptural testimony itself (cf. Coetzee 1972, p. 97; Floor 1980, p. 19). For Calvin (*Inst.* II.7.1), the law of the Old Testament and the prophecies of the prophets were already a reference to the fulfilment of the Old Testament cult service and promises by Christ in the New Testament (cf. also Ridderbos 1950, p. 258, 1957, p. 37).

In his *Institutes* (II.10–11), Calvin devotes attention to discussing the unity of, and the distinction between, the Old and the New Testaments. According to Calvin (*Inst.* II.10.3), the core of this unity is the Christological centrality in which the unity is manifested because the promise of the gospel is

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144. The Reformational principle of *sola Scriptura*, and not the tradition, sharpened Luther's understanding of the justice of God within the context of Scriptural revelation – and especially within the context of God's grace in Christ. According to this, God's justice is not merely punitive in nature but obviously includes mercy for those who believe. For Luther, God's grace culminates in justice in Christ. Only the Word of God proclaims this message of salvation and grace. For Luther, the essence of the salvation message was justification by faith. It involves salvation based only on God's grace, which is abundantly received where the gospel of Christ is preached (Anderson 1997, p. 481).

already contained in the law. According to Calvin (*Inst*. II.11.1), the distinction between the two testaments does nothing to detract from their unity. The points of distinction relate to the manner of service and not to the essence. The points of distinction, therefore, do not prevent the promises of the Old and the New Testament from remaining the same, nor do they deny that the foundation of both, namely Christ, is the same (Coetzee 1972, p. 100).

In his dealings with Scripture, Calvin constantly paid attention to the *scopus Christi* (cf. Floor 1980, p. 19), or how the text relates to Christ (Jordaan 1991, p. 19). According to this, the Scriptures must be read with the aim of finding Christ in them. However, Calvin's *scopus Christi* is not an eclectic principle but one that is taught by the Scriptures themselves in terms of revelation history (Floor 1980, p. 19).

A valuable perspective regarding Christ as the centre and unfolding of the New Testament revelation is opened by Calvin when he deals with the kingdom of God and the kingship of Christ. Calvin writes:

> There can be no doubt that God […] through the hand of his Son will forever be the Ruler and Defender of his church. The truth of this prophecy will be found nowhere else than in Christ. (*Inst*. II.15.3)

The fruit of the gathering of all believers under the rule of Christ is obviously the eternal unity that will exist when all believers will be gathered into the eternal kingdom of God (*Inst*. II.15.5). Through Christ, the New Testament church already has a view of the dawn of that day when the Son hands over the kingdom to the Father.

A characteristic of Calvin's Christology is therefore not that it is a doctrine that dominates and regulates all thinking. Rather, Calvin's Christology contains the core from which everything originates. In this respect, Calvin's Christology is indeed characteristic, as it sees Christ as the centre, as well as the unfolding of the New Testament revelation (Van't Spijker 1995, p. 58).

An important difference between Calvin and Luther can be found in the fact that Luther concentrated to a greater extent on the communion with the 'crucified Christ'. In contrast, with Calvin, it is rather a case of community with the 'exalted-Christ-on-the-cross' and with it 'Christ-in-us' (cf. Snyman 1977, pp. 487–489). The communion with Christ comes about, according to Calvin, mainly because Christ exercises his kingship by ruling through his Spirit – his Spirit, which forms the bond of communion with him (Van't Spijker 1995, p. 59). If Luther therefore says that in the crucified Jesus the true theology is to be found,[145] Calvin would fully affirm this, but in a way in which the exaltation on the cross and through the cross would receive their rightful emphasis (Van't Spijker 1995, p. 63).

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145. For a deeper discussion on Luther's theology, see Van Wyk (2019, pp. 155–176).

■ The place of Belgic Confession Articles 16–19 within the confession

The Belgic Confession rather obviously follows the theological order (or the usual order of systematic theology) and, more specifically, a trinitarian order. In light of this, the structure of the Belgic Confession can be summarised as follows:

- Articles 1–11: Triune God and his revelation.
- Articles 12–17: God the Father and his works in creation and maintenance.
- Articles 18–21: God the Son and atonement.
- Articles 2–37: God the Holy Spirit and salvation.

It may, therefore, at first not seem 'logical' to group Articles 16 and 17 together with the rest of the articles under investigation in this chapter (Arts. 17–19), which is specifically about God the Son. In classical and current Dogmatics textbooks, the doctrine of election (also predestination) is usually dealt with under the locus of God, and specifically his holy decrees (cf. Berkhof 1996, p. 109; Van Genderen & Velema 2008, p. 208).

It does, however, make complete sense to have Article 16 closer to the confession about Christ than to the confession about God himself. In almost every Dogmatics textbook, the doctrine of election follows immediately after the doctrine of God, or it is sometimes included in the doctrine of God as a subsection on God's decrees. Janssen (2016, p. 67) strongly argues the point, however, that we cannot talk about election except after the fact. Predestination is all about who God will save, but election can only be considered retrospectively. It is only after we have been met by Christ and planted in him that this doctrine becomes clear. This emphasises why the doctrine of election, together with the article on the promise of our Saviour (Art. 17), can be appropriately combined with the rest of the confessional articles about Christ (Arts. 18–19).

■ The relationship between Articles 16–19 and other confessions

Every confession emerged from within a very specific context, specifically out of trying to understand the Bible and the gospel correctly. It should also be kept in mind that the Reformational period stretches for almost 100 years (1517–1619). Hence, Dreyer (1997, p. 1206) points out that within the different and numerous independent Reformational churches of the time, quite a number of confessions came into being, and although a couple of reasons for the emergence of confessions can be pointed out, the need to answer to the heresies of the Roman Catholic Church especially was one of the more important motives.

Dreyer (1997, p. 1217) points out that the principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fidei* very strongly predominate and that Jesus Christ and his salvational work form the very heart of the confession. The articles about Christ clearly reflect the thoughts of Calvin, and this is but one of the aspects pointing to the close relation between the *Confession de Foy* (with Calvin as primary author) and the Belgic Confession (drafted primarily by Guido de Brès, being a 'student' of Calvin). It is rather common knowledge that De Brès had met up with both Calvin and Beza in 1559 after he fled from Rijssel (Hofmeyr & Van Niekerk 1987, p. 5).

Article 16 refers to two attributes of God, namely his mercy and justice for sinful people. Gootjes (2007, p. 82) points out that a very specific tradition existed back then when referring to these attributes of God, especially within the context of God's election. Article 12 of the French Confession, as well as Sections III.3 and III.16 of the confession of Beza, mentioned the same attributes. But in the instance of Belgic Confession Article 16, a different approach is clear. The point of departure of the French Confession is the situation of the fall, while Beza mentioned God's justice and mercy even before discussing the creation and fall. The Belgic Confession places God's mercy and justice side by side, but in doing so, it follows the French Confession in taking God's mercy as point of departure (as opposed to Beza). Further, where God's punishment stood central in Beza's line of thought, Belgic Confession Article 16 clearly follows the French Confession when referring to God leaving people in their sins.

In 1566, Article 16 was revised and shortened to almost half of the original length (Gootjes 2007, p. 81), more as a result of removing generalities and repetitions than as a result of theological considerations.

Gootjes (2007, p. 82) describes Belgic Confession Article 17 as 'an ingenious combination of Beza's confession and the French Confession, together with De Brès' own additions'. The Belgic Confession, however, formulates the incarnation of Christ in opposition to the heresies of the Anabaptists (Gootjes 2007, p. 83).

Article 19 discusses the implications of the incarnation of Christ. Gootjes (2007, p. 83) points out that the first part of this article is a rephrasing of Beza's confession, while the second part is an expanded rewriting of Article 15 of the French Confession. The result is that De Brès succeeded in presenting a balanced summary of the doctrine, dealing with both the unity of the person of Christ and his two natures (Gootjes 2007, p. 83).

■ Theological reflection on Belgic Confession Articles 16–19

The English translation of Articles 27, 28 and 29, presented here, is available on the website[146] of the Christian Reformed Church of North America. This translation also made use of the French text as approved by the Synod of Dort.

The exposition, which follows the text of the *Confessio Belgica*, is by no means exhaustive. The few remarks presented here only serve to stress the important Christological aspects which, as a result of postmodern tendencies, came to be at stake.

■ Article 16: God's election

> We believe that all – Adam's descendants having thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of Adam – God showed himself to be as he is: merciful and just. God is merciful in withdrawing and saving from this perdition those who, in the eternal and unchangeable divine counsel, have been elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. God is just in leaving the others in their ruin and fall into which they plunged themselves. (Art. 16)

Article 16 deals directly with the confession about God's election of some and his rejection of others, the latter sometimes viewed as merely the opposite of the former. In confessing the (doctrine of) election of God, Scripture and the Belgic Confession are consistent with describing the condition of fallen humanity, as described in the previous article of the Belgic Confession.

The doctrine of election has always been very difficult to fully comprehend. The great disputes in history (e.g. Augustine and Pelagius), which in some sense culminated in the great Synod of Dort, reflect the tensions in, and efforts to accurately describe, the way in which humanity is saved and the distinction between the role of God and the role of humanity in this.

Although the doctrine of election is a complex one, Van Niekerk (1987, p. 16) points out that this article demonstrates a rather logical flexibility when dealing with this doctrine. Those who are elected by God are not necessarily condemned by God unto eternity. The Synod of Dort has formulated that both election and reprobation are works of God (cf. Canons of Dort 1.1–17), but in Belgic Confession Article 16 it is maintained that those

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146. See https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession (accessed 26 September 2022).

who are not elected by God's merciful election are rejected because of humanity's own fall and corruption. Within the framework of the Belgic Confession, it is not about an intellectual decision of election and rejection. In terms of Article 16, God elects some out of his own free will, while others are left in their fall and corruption into which they threw themselves (Weber 1967, p. 29). According to Van Niekerk (1987):

> There is a close relationship between the divine word and the word of creation, between the divine election of some people and the remaining in their own judgement of others. Through the sin of the first man (Adam) the first man is cast into perdition and destruction (art. 16). Against the general condition in which mankind finds itself, God's special act of election is set. (p. 16)

Polman (1949, p. 195) indicates that Augustine emphasised three aspects to correctly understand election:

1.   Election is completely vested in the will of God.

Out of his own free will, God decided to elect some people and not others. There is no prevision of God on the basis of which he is moved to elect certain persons. Scripture speaks of God choosing by grace alone (Rm 11:5). And if is by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

2.   The election is in Christ.

Taking the lead from Ephesians 1:4, the confession explicitly reads that election is in Christ. This is a very crucial statement of the context of election. Hence, some (cf. Heyns 1978, p. 83) also refer to Christ as the mode of God's election. The elect individual is never a mere isolated individual but always in Christ. Election is exclusively a matter of God-in-Christ. God acts as the exclusive origin of the entire salvation, and in no instance does the act of faith by humans contribute to salvation. By means of faith, salvation (and therefore also election) is known and confessed.

3.   Election is a result of God's predestination of all things.

Those elected by God are being elected in Christ even before the creation of all things, through his predestination of all things, in which God knew his own deeds beforehand. And how could God choose those who did not even exist yet, except through predestination (cf. also Beets 1929, p. 131)?

To this, threefold understanding needs to be added that this election is *eternal*, and this also implies that it is immutable (Beets 1929, p. 132). As God is in his essence, so are his decisions (cf. Is 46:10).

This doctrine is found throughout the Bible, from the call of Abraham, through the history of Isaac, Jacob and their children and right through to the pages of the New Testament. All these examples echo the clear divine initiative.

It is important to note the significance of the article mentioning, in the same breath, that God is both merciful and just. Not only does election reveal God's sovereignty, but so does his being just in the damnation

of others. Reprobation is not the cause of one's sinning but rather humanity itself (Beets 1929, p. 136). In this sense, it must be understood that rejection is not the logical opposite of election. Humanity's alienation from God is on humanity's account only. Belgic Confession Article 16 does not speak of damnation (or reprobation) as the logical opposite of election. The alienation from God is on humanity's account, and on theirs only. Beets (1929) probably said it best:

> Reprobation is not the cause of one's sinning, but man himself is. It is true, if one is not chosen he will not be saved. But it is true also that none but sinners will be damned. (p. 136)

■ Article 17: The recovery of fallen humanity

> We believe that our good God, by marvellous divine wisdom and goodness, seeing that Adam and Eve had plunged themselves in this manner into both physical and spiritual death and made themselves completely miserable, set out to find them, though they, trembling all over, were fleeing from God. And God comforted them, promising to give them his Son, born of a woman, to crush the head of the serpent, and to make them blessed. (Art. 17)

Polman (1949, p. 327) categorically states that Article 17 does not require any further explanation of the content since it very clearly speaks for itself. In its simplicity, Article 17 formally introduces the work of Christ.

By means of following Calvin's exegesis of Genesis 3:15, this article praises God's marvellous wisdom and goodness by which he himself sought fallen human beings and comforted them by means of the promise of the gospel. The gospel is God's answer to the fall of humanity and is the fulfilment of the very first promise in the Bible.

Article 17 is therefore the way in which God set in motion his redemptive decision of election, as confessed in Article 16. A decision by God alone, however important and significant it might be, is not enough. It should also be carried out. Article 17 shows us that exactly and leads us to confess how God through the ages until the end of times carried out the decision he once (before the creation of everything) took. This happens according to the way he determined (and which we tend to call the *via salutis*, or the order of salvation). This indicates the very close relationship between Articles 16 and 17.

The redemptive work of Christ is already revealed moments after the fall. Adam flees from God, deeper into alienation, not knowing that his only hope was that God will set out and find him, and God presents him with the promise of another Man, the Man Jesus Christ (1 Tm 2:5). The promise to humanity comes in the form of the judgement of the snake. In referring to Genesis 3:15, there exists no contradiction between Article 16 (the election of some) and Article 17 (the promise to all in general), although it may

seem the case at a first read. What is confessed here is indeed an apparent general promise, in the same way that God's blessings are sometimes bestowed on believers as well as unbelievers. But the effect of these, and in particular God's revelation in Christ, calls for repentance and faith. Faith, as a true sign of election, is then indeed the fruit of God's particular work in his elected children.

This article makes mention of the misery into which humanity plunged themselves. It may be summarised in one word: *sin*. The depth of this sin, this misery, is underscored by the phrase that humanity plunged themselves both into physical and spiritual death. Physical death means the tearing apart of soul and body if humanity must exchange time with eternity. Bodily death is one of the bitter consequences of sin. In the first place, it is the physical death with which the violation of the probation commandment is punished. And then there is even more: as a consequence of the fall, this article also mentions spiritual death. It is the death of the soul, in the sense that the soul is torn from God.

But the eternal order of salvation clearly shines through in the article. Crumbs of thought with regard to the covenant are present in Article 17, to mention a few:

• God himself introduces the covenant. He is the Initiator to bridge the immense gap between himself and fallen humanity.
• The moment of initiation of the covenant lies in the moment God addresses the snake with the mother of promises in Genesis 3:15 (the so-called *protevangelium*). In these words, the seed of the gospel is already present.
• The Mediator of the covenant is mentioned, and it is Christ. Paul, in Galatians 4:4, refers to the fullness of time when God would send his Son, born of a woman. The reference to 'born of a woman' is also used here in Article 17. Christ, the eternal Son of God, has assumed the nature of humanity through his birth from a woman and thus became the true Mediator of the covenant of grace. And in doing so, he crushed the head of the snake.
• The immense and eventual end goal of the covenant of grace is mentioned by means of the comfort that God already promised to Adam and Eve, already to be experienced in this life. This comfort is an anticipation of the regeneration and sanctification by God's Holy Spirit.

◾ Article 18: The incarnation

So then we confess that God fulfilled the promise made to the early fathers and mothers by the mouth of the holy prophets when he sent the only and eternal Son of God into the world at the time appointed. The Son took the 'form of a

slave' and was made in 'human form', truly assuming a real human nature, with all its weaknesses, except for sin; being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, without male participation.

And Christ not only assumed human nature as far as the body is concerned but also a real human soul, in order to be a real human being. For since the soul had been lost as well as the body, Christ had to assume them both to save them both together.

Therefore we confess (against the heresy of the Anabaptists who deny that Christ assumed human flesh from his mother) that Christ shared the very flesh and blood of children; being the fruit of the loins of David according to the flesh, descended from David according to the flesh; the fruit of the womb of the virgin Mary; born of a woman; the seed of David; the root of Jesse; descended from Judah, having descended from the Jews according to the flesh; descended from Abraham – having assumed descent from Abraham and Sarah, and was made like his brothers and sisters, yet without sin. In this way Christ is truly our Immanuel – that is: 'God with us'. (Art. 18)

Directed specifically against the Anabaptists, this article defends and confesses the incarnation of Christ. It does, however, also link closely with the previous article in that it describes and confesses that the incarnation of Christ is the indispensable presupposition for the Son of God to fulfil the work of reconciliation.

However, on the other side of the coin, the incarnation of Christ cannot be understood in a way that the Son of God would cease to be true God. The Logos did not *change* or *become* flesh. The incarnation is not a change of substance with the effect that the Son of humanity takes the place of the Son of God (Rohls 1987, p. 104).

■ Article 19: The two natures of Christ

We believe that by being thus conceived the person of the Son has been inseparably united and joined together with human nature, in such a way that there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in a single person, with each nature retaining its own distinct properties. Thus his divine nature has always remained uncreated, without beginning of days or end of life, filling heaven and earth. Christ's human nature has not lost its properties but continues to have those of a creature – it has a beginning of days; it is of a finite nature and retains all that belongs to a real body.

And even though he, by his resurrection, gave it immortality, that nonetheless did not change the reality of his human nature; for our salvation and resurrection depend also on the reality of his body. But these two natures are so united together in one person that they are not even separated by his death.

So then, what he committed to his Father when he died was a real human spirit which left his body. But meanwhile his divine nature remained united with his human nature even when he was lying in the grave; and his deity never ceased to be in him, just as it was in him when he was a little child, though for a while it did not so reveal itself. These are the reasons why we confess him to be true God

and truly human – true God in order to conquer death by his power, and truly human that he might die for us in the weakness of his flesh. (Art. 19)

Article 19 naturally flows forth from the previous article in that it expands on the confession of the two natures of Christ.

The Belgic Confession here clearly aims to preserve the Chalcedonian distinction of the two natures of Christ; that is, each nature retains its own distinct properties. The council of Chalcedon (451 AD) maintained that Christ was fully God and fully human. Prior to Chalcedon, the church settled their views on the completeness of each of the two natures (Nicaea in 325 AD and Constantinople in 381 AD). The Chalcedonian distinction of the two natures of Christ was an attempt to formulate the relationship between the two natures and how they unite in one Person. It was all about the question: what is really meant by declaring that Jesus was fully God and fully human? The council decided (read: *declared*) as follows (ZA Blog 2018):

> Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all unanimously teach that our Lord Jesus Christ is to us One and the same Son, the Self-same Perfect in Godhead, the Self-same Perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man; the Self-same of a rational soul and body; co-essential with the Father according to the Godhead, the Self-same co-essential with us according to the Manhood; like us in all things, sin apart; before the ages begotten of the Father as to the Godhead, but in the last days, the Self-same, for us and for our salvation (born) of Mary the Virgin Theotokos as to the Manhood; One and the Same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten; acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person and One Hypostasis; not as though He were parted or divided into Two Persons, but One and the Self-same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ; even as from the beginning the prophets have taught concerning Him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself hath taught us, and as the Symbol of the Fathers hath handed down to us. (n.p.)

Hence it is important to note that this article very much focuses on the 'real body', the 'real human spirit', the 'reality of his human nature'. The importance of this is that, in following Calvin, the whole person (body, soul and mind) is corrupted and the Saviour had to be not only fully God but also wholly human. God sent his Son to assume that nature in which disobedience was committed in order to make satisfaction in the same (cf. Art. 20).

■ The relevance of a Reformed Christology

■ Introductory remarks

The relevance of the Belgic Confession in terms of a Reformed Christology can be seen against the background of, among other things, the rise and development of methodological and hermeneutical approaches to the Bible that have been the result of a postmodern view of Scripture.

In South Africa, for instance, one example is the so-called New Reformation, a movement or school of thought which also probably owes its roots to the so-called Jesus Seminar in the United States of America (USA) (Muller 2002, p. 16).[147] Although the views of the New Reformation cover a wide range of theological topics, one of the major and contentious themes is that of Jesus Christ (Muller 2002, p. 16; cf. also Spangenberg 2009). It will be necessary to cover the roots of this discussion with a brief overview of the development of this school of thought to indicate the influence thereof on a biblical and confessional understanding of Christology.

■ Text and meaning: A postmodern approach to 'Christology'

The traditional Reformed view of Scripture is that the text, *in casu* the text of the Bible, is a written object that came into existence as a unit in history. As such, this view of the text could be attributed to the premodern science paradigm and is indeed also labelled as 'naïve' within the postmodern thinking climate (Draper 1991, p. 235).

According to the Reformed view of Scripture, the text of the Bible received its (fixed, determinable) meaning within the historical context in which it was written (Stanton 1977, pp. 66–67). To arrive at the meaning of the text, the text is then analysed according to historical methods (grammar, style, sociohistorical context). On this point, the Reformed view of Scripture shows a similarity with the modernist paradigm, which accepts that there is an objective reality that is known to humanity through the text (of the Bible).

Also, according to the Reformed view, text and meaning are inextricably linked. However, the fact that the text received its meaning in history does not mean that the Scriptures (in terms of text and meaning) are trapped in history. After all, Scripture is not time-bound but time-oriented (Coetzee 1997, p. 15).

In the first half of the 20th century, text and meaning were separated. Meaning was not only determined by the text, but meaning became dependent on the reader's frame of mind [*Vorverständnis*] and their context (Stanton 1977, p. 67). The reader does not 'understand' the text from what is written, but in a process of 'reconstruction', the reader comes to the actual meaning of the text (Draper 1991, p. 236). With this, the door had been opened for the later concept of 'contextualisation' (Draper 1991, p. 242).

147. Viewpoints of proponents of the New Reformation can be read in *Die Nuwe Hervorming* (Muller 2002).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the separation between text and meaning was carried even further. Within the thought climate of the emerging postmodern scientific paradigm, reception theorists such as Jauss and Iser stated that there is no such thing as an independent and objective text. They posited that a text can only be described in terms of its reception. What is written there is nothing more than a reader offer that the (modern) reader fills in with a specific meaning from his own reality (context) (cf. Lategan 1984, pp. 10–12). In this way, the 'text' is not an independent artefact but something that arises in interaction between the reader offer and the reader. With this, the foundation of postmodern contextualisation has already been laid.

However, postmodernism's view of text and meaning is deeply grounded in the reading strategies of deconstruction. The deconstructionist view of the meaning-creating nature of language is taken a step further in postmodern thinking: the text is also meaning-creating. A text does not have meaning, but one creates meaning by repeatedly assigning meaning to it in the reading process. Thus, the text becomes an open matter in terms of meaning (Hunter 1987, p. 130).

◼ With Christology, everything is at stake

The arguments above make one realise that the *zeitgeist* of postmodernism has left a lasting impression on humanity and the way in which contemporary people in South Africa think and believe, not to mention the influence on theology as a discipline and specifically on the central foundation of Christology. In the field of (theological) science, the legacy of postmodernism left a very clear and distinctive mark on the way in which research was conducted and presented. The epistemological dualism, which is characteristic of the modern dialogue between science and theology, was pushed to the fore by postmodernism (De Lange 2002, p. 125). Critical rationalism became an alternative way of reading and 'understanding' the Bible (Van der Walt 2004, p. 144).

The wider spread of critical rationalism, as precisely an alternative way in which the Bible should be read and understood (in response to the naïve way in which traditional Reformed theology has been doing so far; cf. Craffert 2002a, pp. 67–68), can be pointed out as one of the more definable catalysts that gave rise to a school of thought in South African theological ranks referred to as the 'New Reformation'. However, it is the clear undertones of critical realism that fuelled the birth of the New Reformation.

Seen in the light of the current *zeitgeist*, the Bible must still play the central role in theology, but then with consideration of the own nature of the biblical writings, as well as of the relevant *zeitgeist* in which they were written.

In the critical approach, a quasi-demythologising of biblical elements is proposed. Wolmarans (2002, p. 16) emphasises this aspect as an important insight on which the New Reformation is based. According to this, the Bible uses, among other things, a type of myth-literature to talk about the mysteries of life and death. By way of explanation, Wolmarans refers to Genesis 1 and 2 as myth which is regarded as literal history by Christian churches.

The insights of the New Reformation are based on newer knowledge, which is the result of the latest research within the spirit and thought of the postmodern paradigm. The Jesus Seminar in the USA tried to use these new insights to come up with new results regarding the historicity, or lack thereof, of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Du Plessis 2003, pp. 121–122). These new insights became the leading element in biblical explanation.

The intellectual integrity of theologians is highly valued. The knowledge that contemporary research yields leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of members of churches with traditional historical dogmas. It seems as if faith cedes territory to a (post)modern theology of the mind.

The New Reformation relies heavily on research from the Jesus Seminar. To them, the portrayal of Jesus' path of suffering in the gospels shows strong similarities with the Greek heroic pattern. This leads to the conclusion that the story of Jesus can be explained more powerfully in terms of culturally sensitive myths, rather than taking the gospels' description of Jesus literally (cf. also Craffert 2002b, p. 85).

Even more so are the developmental thoughts within a postmodern age of contemporary scientific theology. These thoughts may perhaps be best summarised by concluding that not only the Bible but the whole of the Christian tradition are human constructs. Everything that is written in the Bible about God and Jesus has been written by human beings. Everything that has been said and written in the Christian tradition about God, Jesus and the Spirit was written and conveyed by humans (Spangenberg 2009, p. 359).

The incorporation of these new insights into theology, especially regarding views about Jesus Christ, clearly outlines the way in which a break has occurred (and now exists) with the traditional beliefs. One can rightly wonder: if faith has led some to a particular belief, and knowledge has led the New Reformers to a (new and totally different) intellectual reality, what must the Christian believe and confess? If Christ's personhood and work, as contained and confessed in the Belgic Confession, are questioned, the entire reconciliation of humanity with God is at stake.

■ Conclusion

Metaphorically, the centrepiece of a decoration or display embodies the theme or symbolises the main gist. This is especially true in the case of the Belgic Confession. Although the different articles, albeit not merely decorative in nature (and while all of the articles carry in themselves the weight of *homologia*), the articles about Jesus Christ form the centrepiece, the crux, the main thrust of our understanding of who God is, how he revealed himself, and especially how he made known his plan with regard to the salvation of humankind. There exists only one way to salvation, and that is in and through Jesus Christ.

It is indeed the case that much of the person and work of Jesus Christ is a great mystery. But this does not make it less truthful. The one and only God, who revealed himself truthfully (and as Truth) in the Old and New Testaments, gave us all of Scripture (2 Tm 3:16). Therefore, it has to be said that the Scriptures contain an objective truth that was given to humanity from outside of humanity. From revelational historical data, the truth (God's truth) is therefore always (humanly speaking) objective.

In the New Testament, Christ is repeatedly connected to truth. He teaches the truth (Mt 22:16) and teaches with truth (Mk 12:32). He can do this alone because he himself is God, and the truth he teaches has God as its source (Mk 12:14, 32). Therefore, everything that Christ teaches is indeed the truth (Mk 12:32). In everything, Christ is the fulfilment of the truth of the law, or the Old Testament (cf. Jn 1:17), and is therefore himself the way and the truth (Jn 1:14).

The entire Scripture thus testifies to the authoritative truth that God has revealed himself in history (cf. Groothuis 2000, p. 20; Helberg 1983, p. 61). However, the Scriptures still bear witness to this truth today, as the Spirit in the hearts of people bears witness to the truth. After all, the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of truth (Jn 15:26; 16:13) and therefore guides humanity into the truth (Jn 16:13). The Spirit can do all this because the Spirit itself is also truth (1 Jn 5:6).

In theological reflection, the necessity is therefore sensed to be guided by the Spirit of truth as the first author of the Bible. This happens by invoking the Name of God (as a source of truth) to be guided in all labour on the path of truth. After all, God's law is truth, and the truth of God is law. Article 22 in the Belgic Confession also sheds light here: 'We believe that the Holy Spirit ignites a sincere faith in our hearts in order to obtain the true knowledge of this great mystery [reconciliatory work of Christ]'. However, God reveals his truth in a gracious way in Christ. In and through Christ, the truth comes to humanity as gospel (good news). In Christ, humanity is

therefore no longer under the law and God's judgement but under the grace of the truth of God in Christ. Through Christ, God's truth therefore comes to humanity in a particularly gracious way. Only through his mediation, without which no pure knowledge of God is possible, is the truth revealed and knowable. This truth does not only consist of facts but is known in a personal and obedient relationship of faith.

A biblical and confessional correct understanding of who Jesus Christ is, and what he has done, is crucial in theology. With him, we receive(d) everything, and without him, we lose everything.

God's justice and our righteousness: Belgic Confession Articles 20–23

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■ Introduction

With Articles 20–23, we find ourselves right in the heart of the Christology of the Belgic Confession. In a general sense, of course, the person and work of Christ permeate all of our confession,[148] but in a more specific sense, it would be fair to say that Guido de Brès has a well-ordered Christology *proper*. It already starts in Article 10, which, flowing from the confession on the Trinity in Articles 8 and 9, speaks about the divinity of the Son of God in terms reminiscent of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD). Christology again comes to the fore in Articles 18 and 19. Here, the focus is not so much on the divine pre-existence of the Son but on his incarnation (Art. 18) and his two natures (Art. 19) – this time using terminology from another council of the early church, the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD). Directly following this

148. Think, for example, of God's eternal election in Jesus Christ (Art. 16), of Christ's eternal kingship which constitutes and governs the church (Art. 27, 31), of the fact that the truth of the sacraments is to be found in Jesus Christ (Art. 33) and of the final return of Christ (Art. 37).

confession of Christ's person, De Brès deals with Christ's work and its effects: what God has done through Christ (Art. 20), what Christ himself has done (Art. 21) and what this effectuates in human beings through the work of the Holy Spirit (Art. 22–24).[149] This, in broad lines, would constitute the Belgic Confession's Christology *proper*. Furthermore, seeing that the church and our confessions have never spoken (and should never speak) about the person and work of Christ in abstract terms, but always as they pertain to our salvation (Need 2008, pp. 35–37), we can with some justification say that in Articles 20–23 we have reached the heart of the Christology of the Belgic Confession. I leave open the question of whether this is also the heart of the confession itself.

■ Articles 20–23: Scripture and context

The aim of this collection – namely, to elucidate the contemporary relevance of the Belgic Confession – should not be at the expense of a solid confessional hermeneutic. For a Reformed reading of the confessions, this means, first and foremost, that the content of the confession should be read and understood in the light of Scripture. But it also means that aspects such as textual criticism, historical context and language should be taken into account (Coetzee 2016). The aim of the next several paragraphs is to do exactly that.

■ Article 20: Perfectly merciful and ... very just[150]

Formally, Article 20 does not belong to the articles about the person of Christ that precede it (Art. 18–19), nor does it strictly belong to the articles about the work of Christ that follow upon it (Art. 21–23). However, what this article does is provide the reader of the Belgic Confession with the formal, theological structure within which the reconciliation events take place (Heyns 1992, pp. 242–243). This article is therefore of the utmost importance for our understanding of the work of reconciliation as it is dealt with in the subsequent articles, and it should constantly be kept in mind. The justice and the mercy of God – which also, though more subtly, appear in the corresponding article of the French Confession[151] – provide the theological framework within which the work of reconciliation is accomplished:

149. For more on the Christology of the Belgic Confession, see Kamphuis (2012).

150. When quoting from the Belgic Confession, the 1985 version of the Christian Reformed Church is used.

151. French Confession, Article 16: 'We believe that God, in sending his Son, intended to show his love and inestimable goodness towards us, giving him up to die to accomplish all righteousness, and raising him from the dead to secure for us the heavenly life' (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 96). See also Heidelberg Catechism, QA 11; Canons of Dort 2:2; Westminster Confession VIII.5.

'So God made known his *justice* toward his Son [...] and he poured out his *goodness and mercy* on us' (Art. 16; [*author's added emphasis*]). This framework reflects the fact that the salvation of man is the loving initiative of God: 'We believe that God [...] sent his Son' and 'giving to us his Son to die by a most perfect love'.

Incidentally, Article 16 of the Belgic Confession also speaks about the justice and the mercy of God: '[...] God showed himself to be as he is: merciful and just'. There, however, God's justice and mercy lead to two very different outcomes: election (as a result of God's mercy) and reprobation (as a result of God's justice). Here, in Article 20, God's justice and mercy do not diverge into two different outcomes but rather converge in his Son, 'for our justification'.

In both these articles, however, God's justice and mercy should not be seen as competing attributes. In our human understanding, mercy, justice, love and wrath are very often experienced as opposing concepts. But in God, all his attributes are one – his justice is never without mercy, and his mercy is never without justice. As Grudem (1994, p. 180; [*emphasis in the original*]) rightly says: 'God himself is a *unity*, a unified and completely integrated whole person who is infinitely perfect in *all* of his attributes'. This is the simplicity of God that was already confessed in Article 1 of the Belgic Confession: 'We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God' [French: *simple essence spirituelle*; Latin: *et simplicem essentiam spiritualem*] (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, pp. 70–71). In Article 16, God's simplicity is expressed in election and reprobation; in Article 20, it is expressed in Christ, the Saviour of all who have been elected. In Christ, God is completely just and completely merciful. In fact, two more attributes are even added: God's goodness ('and he poured out his goodness and mercy on us') and God's love ('[...] giving to us his Son to die, by a most perfect love'). Even with the addition of these two attributes, there is no conflict in God: in Christ God's justice, mercy, goodness and love come together 'in order that by him we might have immortality and eternal life'.

◼ Article 21: A high priest ... offering himself

After having provided the framework for the reconciliation events, Article 21 takes the reader straight to the heart of Christ's work. Guido de Brès chooses to deal with Christ's work through the lens of his priestly office: 'We believe that Jesus Christ is a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek [...]'. Christ's office, after his anointing with the Holy Spirit at his baptism (Mt 3:16), has been a dominant theme in theology throughout the history of the church, especially since the Reformation, and therefore merits a few brief remarks.

With a few exceptions,[152] the church fathers and medieval theologians consistently spoke about the *munus duplex*, the twofold office of Christ: king and priest (Macleod 2017, pp. 352–353). But since the Reformation, and especially through the work of John Calvin, the *munus triplex* (king, priest and prophet) has become 'a key formula in Reformed catechesis and theology' (Macleod 2017, p. 354). Several Reformed confessions have included Christ's threefold office: the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 12), the Westminster Confession of Faith (8.1), the Westminster Larger Catechism (42–45) and the Westminster Shorter Catechism (23–36) (eds. Beeke & Ferguson 1999, pp. 68–71). In Article 21 of the Belgic Confession, however, De Brès chooses to focus on only one aspect of Christ's office: his priesthood. This is, of course, a result of his focus on Christ's atoning work on the cross, in which the priestly aspect of his work takes centre stage.

In Article 21, Christ's high priestly office is characterised simultaneously as *priesthood* and as *sacrifice*.

Firstly, his priesthood is described as being in the order of Melchizedek. This description presupposes a wealth of Old Testament knowledge, on which De Brès does not elaborate.[153] The Levitical priesthood was the regular priestly order in the Old Testament – it was hereditary, only meant for persons from the tribe of Levi. Its purpose was 'to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins' (Heb 5:1). But the deficiencies of this regular priesthood were clear for all to see: because of death, the Levitical priests had to be replaced regularly (Heb 7:23); the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins (Heb 10:4); and, as a result, 'again and again the same sacrifices [had to be offered] that [could] never take away sins' (Heb 10:11). However, the Old Testament briefly introduces another priestly order (Gn 14 and Ps 110), one which is subsequently taken up by the author of the letter to the Hebrews, namely that of Melchizedek – king of righteousness, king of peace (Salem) and greater than Abraham (Heb 7:1–10). It is in this priestly order that Christ, who was from the tribe of Judah and did not qualify for the Levitical priesthood, is placed: 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek' (Ps 110:4, as quoted in Heb 7:17). The superior nature of the priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek can be seen from several aspects: this priesthood is established not by law but by an oath (Heb 7:21; see Art. 21: 'made such by an oath'); it is permanent in nature (Heb 7:22; see Art. 21: 'Jesus Christ is a high priest forever'); it has a holy and blameless high priest (Heb 7:26); it is based on a sufficient and once-for-all sacrifice (Heb 7:27–28; see Art. 21: 'we have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God than this one and

152. See Macleod (2017, p. 352) for the exceptions in Eusebius and Chrysostom and later in Aquinas.

153. For more on Christ as priest and priesthood in the Old Testament, see Belcher (2016, pp. 59–103).

only sacrifice, once made'); and it is carried out in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:4–5, 9:11–14) (Belcher 2016, pp. 97–101). All this and more should be understood when reading the phrase with which Article 21 begins: 'We believe that Jesus Christ is a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek […]'.

Secondly, Christ is not just the perfect high priest but also the ultimate sacrifice. In Article 21, the transition from priest to sacrifice is subtle and almost imperceivable: 'he presented himself in our name before his Father […] by offering himself on the tree of the cross and pouring out his precious blood'. The high priest became the sacrifice while still retaining his office. Completely voluntarily, he presented himself as a sacrifice to the Father to appease his wrath with full satisfaction. The words 'full satisfaction' [French: *pleine satisfaction*] counter the so-called acceptilation theory, taught by Duns Scotus and later taken over by the Remonstrants, which says that the satisfaction rendered by Christ was not in itself really a true or full equivalent, but it was merely accepted by God, through his gracious goodwill, as sufficient (Van Bruggen 1964, p. 103). As Berkhof (1949) writes:

> This passion has a peculiar value and a special efficacy only because it was foreordained as the means of salvation, and because God was willing to accept it as effectual. Duns [*Scotus*] denies the infinite value of the merits of Christ, because they were merits of the human nature, which is after all finite. By an act of his will, however, God determined to accept them as sufficient. A merit that is not at all commensurate with the debt owed is willingly accepted by God. (p. 179)

Clearly, De Brès was aware of this view and summarily disposes of it with the 'full satisfaction' of Christ's sacrifice. The sacrificial work of Christ is subsequently proven with a host of quotations from Scripture that describe his suffering in great detail 'as the prophets had predicted' – several passages from Isaiah 53, as well as Psalm 69:4, 1 Peter 3:18, Luke 22:44 and Matthew 27:46, are cited. It ends by stating, 'he endured all this for the forgiveness of our sins'.

In anticipation of Article 22, Guido de Brès ends Article 21 by stressing the exclusive priesthood of Christ over and against the Roman Catholic teaching of finding salvation in saints, good works or the Mass. He does this by using words of exclusivity and uniqueness, many of which come straight from Scripture (emphasis in the following is mine): 'we know *nothing* but Jesus' (1 Cor 2:2), 'we consider *all* things as dung' (Phlp 3:8), 'we find *all* comforts in his wounds' (1 Pt 2:24), 'have *no* need to seek or invent *any* other means', 'this *one* and *only* sacrifice, *once* made' (1 Pt 3:18), 'which renders believers *perfect forever*' (Heb 10:14). This vocabulary excludes (in the most literal sense of the word) any other high priest or sacrifice. And thus De Brès ends: 'This is also why the angel of God called

him Jesus – that is, "Saviour" – because he would save his people from their sins'. Having started with the Son of God's office (Christ, anointed as Priest [and Prophet and King]), De Brès now ends with his proper name: Jesus.

■ Article 22: Faith embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits

Article 22, together with Articles 23 and 24, reminds the reader of what John Calvin says at the opening of Book III of his *Institutes*. There, the Reformer makes clear that (Calvin [1559] 1960):

> [*A*]s long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. (p. 537)

Article 21 was all about Christ 'outside of us' (respectfully said), but Article 22 'teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits'.[154] Article 22 does this in a very striking, two-part manner.

In the first part, a clear statement is made: he who believes in Christ has everything needed for salvation, and 'no longer looks for anything apart from him', thereby linking this article to the end of the previous article (remember the exclusive language of Art. 21). While making this statement, De Brès briefly introduces the work of the Holy Spirit ('the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith') and the reader is given a glimpse of the doctrine of union with Christ ('a true faith that embraces Jesus Christus with all his merits, and makes him its own').

In this first part, there is a small but significant change to the original text that needs to be noted. The original Dutch reads: '*Wy geloven dat door de ware kennisse deser hoogher verborgenheydt, de H. Geest in onse herten ontsteeckt een oprecht geloove* [...]'.[155] This was, however, changed by the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) to read as follows: '*Wij gelooven dat om ware kennisse deser grooter verborgenheyt te becomen, de H. Geest in onse herten ontsteeckt een oprecht geloove* [...]' (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 107).[156] First it was: 'through knowledge to faith'. Then it became:

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154. Calvin, *Inst*. III.1.1. Philip Melanchthon was one of the first to introduce this idea of Christ's benefits; see Van Wyk (2022, p. 25).

155. Translated into English: 'We believe that, through the true knowledge of this high mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a sincere faith [...]' (own translation).

156. Translated into English: 'We believe that, in order to gain true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a sincere faith [...]'. Modern translation: 'We believe that for us to acquire the true knowledge of this great mystery the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith'.

'through faith to knowledge' (reminding one of the well-known phrase: *fides quarens intellectum*).[157] These two versions, if understood correctly, should not be seen to stand in opposition to one another – as if De Brès's version was considered to be less biblical and, therefore, had to be corrected by the Synod of Dort. It is rather a case of the latter wanting to counter the Remonstrant heresy of 'moral persuasion'. According to the Remonstrants, God's grace is, in particular, an offer made to the human mind. If only people *understood* what God desired from them, then the human will would follow. Nonetheless, the choice of the will remains a free, independent act – in principle, a person can choose to reject the offer of grace. In Chapters 3 and 4, Article 12, the Canons of Dort refer to this view as 'moral persuasion': an appeal is made to the mind to understand what is good and to make the decision to follow it (Te Velde 2019). But the Canons of Dort say that this moral appeal is not sufficient (Te Velde 2019):

> But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God's work is done, it remains in human power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work, one that is at the same time most powerful and most pleasing, a marvellous, hidden, and inexpressible work, which is not less than or inferior in power to that of creation or of raising the dead […]. (p. 244)

By changing the order (from 'through knowledge to faith' to 'through faith to knowledge'), the Canons of Dort did not, in principle, disagree with De Brès: after all, what would faith mean without some basis of knowledge? Or as Calvin puts it: 'Faith rests not on ignorance, but on knowledge. And this is, indeed, knowledge not only of God but of the divine will'.[158] Instead, the fathers of Dort wanted to stress that faith, having knowledge as its basis, is a supernatural gift, worked by the Holy Spirit. And therefore: '[…] for us to acquire the true knowledge of this great mystery the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith'.

In the second part of Article 22, the statement made in the first part (that those who believe in Christ have everything needed for salvation) is then argued and proven. This is carried out in a fashion similar to what is found in Question and Answer (QA) 30 of the Heidelberg Catechism. It is a very simple argument: 'either all that is required for our salvation is not in Christ, or […] all is in him'. Choosing the first option would mean 'blasphemy' [French: *c'est un blaspheme trop enorme contre Dieu*], leaving the believer with 'only half a Saviour' [*que Iesus Christ ne seroit que demy Sauveur*] (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 107). Choosing the second option entails

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157. For more on *fides quarens intellectum* as it was worked out by Anselm of Canterbury (and countered by Thomas Aquinas), see Van den Brink (2000, pp. 104–110, 118–121).

158. Calvin, *Inst*. III.2.2.

having our 'salvation entirely' in Christ,[159] and this means confessing justification 'by faith alone', 'apart from works' (based on Rm 3:28). The confession is quick to add the qualifying remark that, properly speaking, it is not faith itself that justifies us, but that faith is 'only the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness'.[160]

Then follows a paragraph that elicited some discussion during the Synod of Dort, both during the presence of the international delegates and after their departure. In this paragraph, Christ's righteousness is described as 'making available to us all his merits and all his holy works he has done for us and in our place'. The chairman of the synod, Johannes Bogerman, suggested replacing the phrase about all Christ's holy works with a more general reference to his 'obedience'. This was a very relevant suggestion in light of a recent discussion about the question of whether everything Christ had done on Earth has saving value for us. Some thought that only Christ's actual suffering was of value to us. But the delegates from England and Basel insisted that the words about Christ's holy works be kept in the article (Vonk 1956, pp. 41–42). This is what eventually happened. In fact, the synod even decided to add the words 'and in our place' (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 27; Gootjes 2007, pp. 207–208). All of this was to emphasise that Christ's complete work on Earth forms a unity – everything he did, whether he was 'merely' living according to God's will in going about his daily ministry or suffering in body or soul, was for our salvation. The Socinian heresy, espoused by the Remonstrants, that Christ was merely an exemplary human being who had to pay the price for his good life, was cut off at the root. All Christ's merits and all his holy works were redemptive and substitutionary.

In Reformed theology, this issue became known as the imputation of both the active and the passive obedience of Christ, with the debate at the synod especially focusing on his active obedience. What is called 'all his holy works' in Article 22 is described in different ways in other Reformed confessions. Answer 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism says (eds. Beeke & Ferguson 1999):

> God […] grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I had never had had, nor committed any sin; yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me. (p. 102)

In Article 35 of the Irish Articles of Religion (1615), we can read (Ussher n.d.):

> It pleased our heavenly Father of his infinite mercy without any desert of ours, to provide for us the most precious merits of his own Son, whereby our ransom

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159. Emphasised text in the original Dutch version: '*de ghene die Jesum Christum door 't geloove besit*, *alles heeft*, **ende en heeft gheen ghebreck meer**' (Bakhuizen Van Den Brink 1976, p. 107).

160. See also Heidelberg Catechism QA 61.

might be fully paid, the law fulfilled, and his justice fully satisfied […] He for them paid their ransom by his death. He for them fulfilled the law in his life. That now in him, and by him every true Christian man may be called a fulfiller of the law: forasmuch as that which our infirmity was not able to effect, Christ's justice hath performed. (n.p.)

And in the Westminster Confession of Faith, we find it articulated as follows (Van Dixhoorn 2014):

(8.5) The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself […] has fully satisfied the justice of his Father.
(11.3) Christ, by his obedience and death, fully discharged the debt of all those who are justified. (pp. 119, 163)

There is the real risk, however, of using the distinctions 'active' and 'passive' as referring to different periods of Christ's life (Committee on Christian Education n.d.; cf. Taylor 2012):

A common mistake is to gloss Jesus' 'active obedience' as his 'sinless life' and his 'passive obedience' as his 'atoning death'. In other words, Jesus was active in his living and suffered in his dying. (pp. 15–16)

Both 'active' and 'passive' refer to the whole of Christ's work, but they highlight certain aspects rather than certain periods of his work. The distinction is an acknowledgement of the fact that the law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. On the one hand, penalties are inflicted for all transgressions of God's law, but on the other hand, God's law requires positive fulfilment (Murray 1955, pp. 15–17). As human beings, we not only need moral neutrality (a clean slate with sins forgiven) but also a positive moral righteousness (Grudem 1994, p. 571). We need a record of obedience. This cannot come from ourselves but only from Christ, who is our righteousness (1 Cor 1:30). He carried the burden of God's wrath for our sinfulness, but he also positively fulfilled all righteousness (Mt 3:15):

And faith is the instrument that keeps us in communion with him and with all his benefits. When those benefits are made ours, they are more than enough to absolve us of our sins. (Art. 22)

■ Article 23: Justified freely … through redemption in Christ

Article 23 has a similar make-up to Article 22: firstly, a statement; secondly, its proof. This has to do with the fact that both these articles have justification by faith alone as their content – whereas Article 22 *poses* the doctrine of justification, Article 23 *defends* it. And defence was certainly called for if the 16th-century debate between Rome and the Reformers is kept in mind.

There was a clear difference in the understanding of justification between Rome and the Reformers. This difference has become known through the terms 'analytic' and 'synthetic'. Rome held to an analytic view of justification,

which entails a real moral and ontological change in the individual – hence the Latin term *justificare* [to make righteous; *iustum* = righteous, just; *facere* = to make] (Maas 2017, p. 516). It means that the predicate (righteousness) is already in the subject (the person), before they are accepted by God. Thereby (Piper 2018):

> [*In*] order for God to justify a person in the Roman system, that person must be righteous by definition. Righteousness must inhere within the individual. This righteousness may [*well*] be rooted in the grace of God, but it must become a personal, inherent, and experiential righteousness through the cooperation of good works. (n.p.)

How does this happen? Through (1) brokenness of the heart in acknowledgement of guilt, (2) confession of sin with the mouth and (3) satisfaction through good works (Van Bruggen 1964, p. 114). This understanding of justification explains why the distinction between justification and sanctification, so crucial in Protestant theology, remains vague in Roman Catholic theology. Or, to be more precise, in Roman Catholic theology, sanctification is put before justification. The Reformers, on the other hand, held to a synthetic view of justification, where the predicate (righteousness) is not in the subject (the believer) but is added to it; justification is declaring righteous. That is (Piper 2018):

> Unlike the analytic view of justification, our works do not combine with this righteousness in order to make us intrinsically righteous. Our right standing with God is never based on our own holiness […] We cannot be justified unless the alien righteousness of Christ is added to us [*through*] imputation. (n.p.)

Martin Chemnitz ([1565–1573] 1971), 16th-century Lutheran theologian, summarised the respective positions well when he wrote that the Roman Catholic theologians:

> […] understand the word 'justify' according to the manner of the Latin composition as meaning 'to make righteous' through a donated or infused quality of inherent righteousness, from which works of righteousness proceed. The Lutherans, however, accept the word 'justify' in the Hebrew manner of speaking; therefore, they define justification as the absolution from sins, or the remission of sins, through imputation of the righteousness of Christ. (pp. 579–580)

In light of this debate, three features became characteristic of the Reformers' understanding of justification (McGrath 2005):

> Believers are *declared* righteous (and this involves a change in their status before God), they are not *made* righteous (which would involve a change in their nature);

> Believers are imputed with the alien righteousness of Christ (synthetic), they do not have the righteousness inherent in them (analytic);

> Though inseparable, a clear distinction is made between justification (the act whereby God declares the sinner to be righteous) and sanctification (the process whereby the believer is renewed internally). (pp. 212–213)

This is the background against which Article 23 (and subsequently also Art. 24) should be read. In defence of the doctrine of justification, De Brès makes the claim that our righteousness before God is contained in the forgiveness of our sins because of Jesus Christ. Two Scripture passages are provided: Psalm 32:1, as quoted by Paul in Romans 4:6–8, in which the blessing of the forgiveness of sins is celebrated; and Romans 3:24, which highlights the gracious character of justification: 'they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'.

In the second part of Article 23, two grounds are given for the claim in the first part (again similar to Art. 22). Firstly, if in justification anything depended on human contribution, the glory of God would have been seriously diminished:

> [...] therefore, we cling to this foundation, which is firm forever, giving all glory to God, humbling ourselves, and recognizing ourselves as we are; not claiming a thing for ourselves or our merits and leaning and resting on the sole obedience of Christ crucified, which is ours when we believe in him. (Art. 22)

Secondly, if in justification anything depended on human contribution, we would forever live without peace. Human experience teaches us that people live with sin until they die. Paul complains about this in Romans 7:

> For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (vv. 14–15)

David begs God not to go into judgement with him: 'Lord, do not enter into judgement with your servants, for before you no living person shall be justified' (Ps 143:2). And Adam knew what it meant to have a conscience filled 'with fear, dread, and terror of God's approach'. Therefore, he 'trembled as he tried to cover himself with fig leaves'. It would not be inconceivable that Guido de Brès used this reference to the fig leaves to subtly hint at the good works of Rome, whereby they were trying to cover up their own sinfulness. But he knew that 'if we had to appear before God relying – no matter how little – on ourselves or some other creature, then, alas, we would be swallowed up'.

■ Contemporary issues and ethical perspectives

Not every textual or exegetical issue regarding the respective articles could be mentioned in the previous paragraph; not every issue that was mentioned can be taken up in this paragraph. There is, however, a discernible line in the issues that were dealt with, as many of them have to do with 'God's justice and our righteousness', the title of this chapter. In this paragraph, in which contemporary issues and ethical perspectives will be explored, justice and righteousness will therefore be the guiding principle.

It must be kept in mind that 'justice' and 'righteousness' are both doctrinal and ethical concepts – though in Articles 20–23, they function almost exclusively in a doctrinal sense. This does not mean that ethical perspectives cannot be explored, but any ethical perspective must be subsequent to and rely upon the preceding doctrinal understanding of these concepts. In a typically lucid article about doctrine and ethics, McGrath (1991) has made it clear that:

> [/]n order for anyone – Christian, atheist, Marxist, Muslim – to make informed moral decisions, it is necessary to have a set of values concerning human life. Those values are determined by beliefs, and those beliefs are stated as doctrines. Christian doctrine thus provides a fundamental framework for Christian living. (p. 146)[161]

If this is true, which I believe both logically and biblically to be the case, then Christian ethics will have a unique perspective on justice and righteousness, based on its doctrinal understanding of these concepts.

The doctrinal understanding of justice and righteousness is eloquently articulated in the articles under discussion. However, this articulation has not remained unopposed in Protestant circles. We will, therefore, first revisit this doctrine from a contemporary point of view and subsequently formulate some ethical perspectives.

■ The doctrine of justification by faith

Is the doctrine of justification still the article by which the church stands or falls, as Luther seemed to have implied? (Kamphuis 1997, p. 79) For many people today, Luther's question (summarised in the well-known words 'where do I find a gracious God?', in answer to which the discovery of the justification by faith was his entrance into paradise) is not their question anymore. This was famously articulated by the Lutheran World Federation during its meeting in Helsinki in 1963. There, it was concluded that the question is not anymore: 'where do I find a gracious God?', but rather: 'God, where are you?' Modern man does not suffer from God's wrath anymore but rather from his absence; sin is not the evil that has to be overcome, but meaning is the goal to be attained (eds. Van Genderen & Velema 1992, p. 574). Van Genderen and Velema (eds. 1992, p. 575) call this a radical shift in theology and typify it as a shift away from a reasoning that starts from God, towards a reasoning that starts from the questioning, searching and suffering human being. In my view, this shift can be detected in all of the contemporary attempts to come to a joint

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161. Post (2019, pp. 19–20) makes the same point with regard to justice and righteousness in Dutch: '*Het recht in de Bijbel komt niet voort uit de mens of uit gezagsdragers* [...] *Het recht vormt in de oervorm vrijwel altijd een onverbrekelijk deel van de godsdienst. God openbaart in de Bijbel aan de mens wat recht is*'.

formulation or a reformulation of the doctrine of justification, which will be discussed below.

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church was an important attempt to overcome the schism of the 16th century.[162] The Joint Declaration claims to have articulated a 'common understanding' and 'consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification' (Joint Declaration n.d., p. 3). From both sides, this claim has been disputed. The Catholic reaction to the Joint Declaration states, *inter alia* (Responses n.d., clarifications 1):

> For Catholics, therefore, the formula 'at the same time righteous and sinner' [...] is not acceptable. This statement does not, in fact, seem compatible with the renewal and sanctification of the interior man of which the Council of Trent speaks [...] So, for all these reasons, it remains difficult to see how, in the current state of the presentation given in the Joint Declaration, we can say that this doctrine on '*simul iustus et peccator*' is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine decree on original sin and justification. (n.p.)

And from the Protestant side, Lane (2002, pp. 126, 158) has criticised the complete absence of justification as the imputation of Christ's alien righteousness as a 'serious omission'. Maas (2017, p. 539) has also questioned the ambiguous employment of keywords like 'grace', as well as the transposition of prepositions in describing justification as occurring 'by faith and through grace', rather than the more traditional 'by grace through faith'. But despite these serious reservations from both sides, the Joint Declaration was hailed by some as 'the end of the Reformation' (Gierth 1999, p. 6).

A second sign of the revival in interest in the doctrine of justification can be found in the so-called Finnish School of Lutheran Interpretation. This school of thought claims that the forensic doctrine of justification, in which imputation of Christ's alien righteousness plays such a dominant role, was never Luther's intention. Rather, the main focus of Luther was a real ontological participation in God's essence in Christ (Mannermaa 2005, p. 17). This understanding comes very close to the Eastern Orthodox understanding of *theosis* and can be explained by the close geographical proximity of the Finnish Lutheran and the Russian Orthodox churches and their ecumenical dialogues.

Both of the aforementioned views were thus born out of ecumenical concerns. This, in a particular sense, also applies to the third, and most important, contemporary view on the doctrine of justification: the New

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162. See also 'The Gift of Salvation', a similar ecumenical document between Roman Catholics and Protestants in North America (Committee on Christian Education n.d., pp. 31–33).

Perspective on Paul. As Wright (1997, p. 119) has said, justification for Paul is 'not so much about salvation as about the church'. Elsewhere, he calls the doctrine of justification 'the original ecumenical doctrine' (Wright 2006, p. 261). Why? For the New Perspective, in their reading of the Gospels and Paul, justification is not so much about the salvation of individual sinners (whether Jewish or Gentile) but rather about the question of how someone might be included in God's covenant community. Righteousness, as it pertains to the believer, 'is not so much a moral or judicial category as a relational one; it means that one is in covenant with God' (Committee on Christian Education n.d., p. 39). According to the New Perspective, one enters the covenant people of God by grace (and no longer by the boundary markers of the Sabbath, circumcision and dietary restrictions of the old covenant, which Jewish communities wanted to maintain), while one subsequently stays inside through obedience to the covenant. This is the distinction that Sanders introduced when he referred to 'getting in' and 'staying in' (Sanders 1977, p. 17). This brings Wright (1997, p. 124) to translate 'righteousness' [*dikaiosyne*] as 'covenant membership'. It is, furthermore, important to note that Wright distinguishes between a present and a final justification. Present justification is based on faith in Jesus Christ, by which one enters the covenant community (Sanders's 'getting in'). Future justification will correspond to the present justification, but will also follow from (though not earned or merited by) the Spirit-led life of believers (Sanders's 'staying in', also called 'covenantal nomism') (Committee on Christian Education n.d., pp. 40–42).

These are three of the more prominent attempts to come to a joint formulation or a reformulation of the doctrine of justification. Now, it is true that every generation is obliged to re-appropriate this central doctrine; it cannot just be uncritically accepted as part of the tradition. For, as Jaroslav Pelikan (1984, p. 65) has so eloquently stated, 'tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living'. Justification by faith may never become a part of traditionalism, and a rethinking of this central doctrine should therefore not be rejected out of hand.

However, such a rethinking should never occur on the altar of contextualisation and ecumenism. Stated differently: the fact that the questions of modern man have changed should not change the biblical starting point, namely that guilty human beings have to be acquitted by a just and merciful God. This biblical starting point, although not belonging to the context, is central to the text of the gospel. In all three of the above views, there is the real danger of exchanging that which essentially pertains to our vertical relation with God for that which pertains to our horizontal relation with others. But the church will fail miserably in her ecclesiology if her Christology and soteriology are compromised. If we are to draw any ethical perspectives from the doctrine of justification, we should therefore

hold to the biblical truth. Justification is God's act whereby his Son is given up in the place of sinners to God's judgement. The righteousness that was acquired in this way is attributed (imputed) to sinners through the empty hands of faith. This is the wondrous exchange [Latin: *mirifica commutatio*] of which Calvin speaks.[163] It is only when this work of justification, as a restoration of the vertical relation with God, is clearly understood that one can start raising ethical perspectives.

■ Justice through priesthood

God's justice was satisfied and his righteousness for sinners was attained through the priestly work of Jesus Christ: 'We believe that Jesus Christ is a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'; thus, Article 21 introduces the saving work of Christ. Christ fulfilled his priestly office in both his active and passive obedience (see the earlier section titled 'Article 22: Faith embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits'), thereby doing the work of guarding [Hebrew: *shamar*] and serving [*avad*] that was originally expected from the priests (Nm 3:7–8), a work that reaches back to Adam's original mandate (Gn 2:15, where the same Hebrew verbs are used) (Belcher 2016, p. 90). Thereby, Christ shows himself to be the true Adam and 'our only high priest' (Heidelberg Catechism, QA 31).

This becomes clear at different moments in Christ's life. His clearing of the Temple (Mt 21:12–13, and corresponding passages) serves as one such moment – what the priests of his days failed to do, namely to serve the people and to guard the holiness of the Temple, this Christ did through his zeal for God's house (Jn 2:17, with a reference to Ps 69). Another example is his teaching of God's people, which the prophet Malachi identifies as typical of the priesthood (Ml 2):

> True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips [...] For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth. (vv. 6–7)

Christ did this by teaching a true understanding of the law (Mt 5:17–48) and by teaching daily in the Temple during the final days of his life (Lk 19:47). Christ also guarded and served God's people through prayer – another example of his priestly work. This is made very tangible when Christ tells Peter that he prayed for him that, although he would be sifted by Satan, his faith would not fail (Lk 22:31–32). Also, in John 17, which has become known as Christ's high priestly prayer, he prays for his disciples (v. 9) and for all who would believe in him in the future (v. 20). Of course, the culmination of Christ's priestly work would come when:

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163. Calvin (*Inst* IV.17.2).

> [*H*]e presented himself in our name before his Father, to appease his wrath with full satisfaction by offering himself on the tree of the cross and pouring out his precious blood for the cleansing of our sins. (Art. 21)

The only high priest simultaneously became the once-for-all sacrifice. And after the fulfilment of this sacrificial work, Christ performed one more notable priestly work: '[…] lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven' (Lk 24:50). As the priests blessed the people of God in the Old Testament (Nm 6:22–27), so Christ departed from his disciples while blessing them as their eternal high priest.

As the ascended Lord, Christ continues his priestly ministry on behalf of his people. Belcher (2016, p. 102) mentions, for example, his role as the Advocate who pleads for us (1 Jn 2:1); his role as Lamb who is worthy to open the scroll because of his sacrificial work (Rv 5:6–10); and his role as Conqueror, wearing a robe dipped in blood, who leads the armies of heaven in the final battle (Rv 19:13). All this has to do with Christ's office as high priest – on Earth as well as in heaven – whereby he has satisfied God's justice and achieved our righteousness.

Christ's priesthood has everything to do with the priesthood of the Christian and of the church as the body of Christ. When God delivered his people out of Egypt, his purpose was to establish them as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:6); when God saves his church through the priestly work of Christ, he has a similar purpose (1 Pt 2):

> […] you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (v. 9)

Paas (2019), in his book *Pilgrims and priests: Christian mission in a post-Christian society*, uses the metaphor of priesthood to help Christians understand what all of this might mean in a post-Christian world. After all, we live in a world where Christians are in the minority (Paas 2021):

> What's our mission if we are no longer in control – if we do not have any realistic option of reconquering the West? I don't think that is our mission, so what does it mean to have a faithful missionary presence as a minority? That's where the priest metaphor comes in. (n.p.)

Paas considers the priesthood, as found in the first letter of Peter, to be an excellent metaphor to explore our minority mission as Christians in this world. By definition, priests are a minority. They are called out of the people to represent the people to God and represent God before the people. Analogously, Christians are called to represent the world before God and God before the world. And Christians can still do this, even though they are a minority – even though they are the only ones in their street, family or neighbourhood who serve the Lord and worship him. This service is not

just for themselves – they are doing it as priests. And, of course, Christians invite other people to become priests with them. But even if they reject the invitation, which most of them do, then Christians still have this mission. How exactly does this happen?

According to Paas (2021), the Old Testament priests fulfilled their mandate of *representing the people before God* through two acts: by praying and by sacrificing. Prayer happened when the priests brought all of life before God: the sad things, the good things, the anger and the joy. Similarly, Christians worship God in their relationship with their neighbourhood, friends and colleagues when they listen to the stories around them, when they pray for neighbours and friends and colleagues, and in this way bring everyone and everything before God. But priests in the Old Testament also sacrificed – the best of the livestock or the produce of the land was brought before God. Translated into today's context, this means, among other things, that Christians can bring the best of the culture before God. John Calvin, in Book 2 of his *Institutes*, writes about the excellent gifts still found among the unbelievers:

> If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonour the Spirit of God […] Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labour to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are. But shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God? (*Inst* II.2.15)

Even though unbelievers might not acknowledge this, believers can still bring all of these cultural gifts with thanksgiving before God in acknowledgement of his common grace that makes life liveable and even enjoyable.

And then there is the other way around: *representing God before the people*. The priests in the Old Testament represented God before the people by teaching the Torah and by blessing the people. There are many ways in which Christians can teach and bless an unbelieving world (Paas 2021). Partaking in public discourse about the issues of the day, thereby conveying the message of Scripture without necessarily having to mention Scripture, is a form of teaching that can have a great impact. As priests, believers can also extend God's blessing to creation by sharing knowledge, wealth and kindness. Paas (2021) closes by encouraging believers:

> There's a whole network of activities that connect people to God and God to people through those called to be priests. To me, that's a hopeful and identity-giving metaphor as a Christian […] when I'm speaking to those who are a bit hopeless or have lost courage and I say, 'You're not just a single person who happens to be Christian. You're not just the one fool in the family. You're a priest, and you're a priest for them as well', it has a much greater impact. (n.p.)

■ Social justice

Christ, through his priestly work, has satisfied God's justice and attained righteousness for sinners. Does the priesthood of believers have a similar effect on a horizontal level? Does our priesthood also mean something for what has become known as 'social justice'? This is a difficult question to answer, as the term itself has become controversial for the mere fact that different people mean vastly different things by it. For many today, social justice means that there should be an equal distribution of wealth, advantages, privileges and benefits, and that inequality in any of these areas implies sin and demands redress. In other words, 'society has a lump of resources and if they are not shared roughly equally, then we cannot speak of social justice' (DeYoung 2010). Thus, social justice very often tends towards socialism (Sproul 2011).

This is not the tone of Scripture, though. In the biblical vision, justice is first and foremost about upholding the rule of law and treating people fairly in a spirit of honesty, love and mercy (Post 2019, p. 251). Doing justice in the Bible means following the rule of law, showing impartiality, paying what you promised, not stealing, not swindling, not taking bribes and not taking advantage of the weak. Justice in the Bible is very often combined with the concepts of equity and righteousness – equity means equal treatment of all under the law; righteousness points to what is consistent with the demands of the law. Biblical 'social justice' can therefore be taken to mean 'treating people equitably, working for systems and structures that are fair, and looking out for the weak and the vulnerable' (DeYoung 2018).

DeYoung's discussion of whether this biblical understanding is a gospel issue is very enlightening, as it brings us back to what the doctrine of justification by faith is destined to work out in believers and in society. Biblical 'social justice' is, of course, not a gospel issue in the sense that it detracts from the *sola fide* or that it stands on the same level as Christ's work on the cross. But when understood as part of what it means to love your neighbour as yourself, or as part of keeping the second table of the decalogue, or as part of the good works that God has prepared for us, then certainly, biblical 'social justice' is a gospel issue. Built on the foundation of Christ's work to satisfy God's justice, biblical 'social justice' is an issue that believers have to wrestle with as part of their personal and corporate sanctification. Whether social justice is the best term for this is debatable.

■ Conclusion

Articles 20–23 of the Belgic Confession take us straight to our relationship with God, both in its brokenness and in its restored state. This vertical relationship is the primary relationship in which all human beings, knowingly or unknowingly, stand. And this order should be maintained at all costs. It is only when the relationship with God is restored through the finished work of Christ (our high priest), imputed to us by God's grace and accepted by us through faith alone (worked by the Holy Spirit) – it is only then that believers can rightly think about other relationships. This is also reflected in the structure of the Belgic Confession. Subsequent to Articles 20–23, we read in Article 24 about the believer's sanctification. There it is said that 'apart from [justifying faith] they will never do a thing out of love for God but only out of love for themselves and fear of being condemned'. Loving and giving relationships with others will not be possible without a restored relationship with God in Christ. Nothing will come of our priestly office of reflecting a praying, sacrificing, teaching and blessing lifestyle if we are still living in our sin – then we will only act out of love for ourselves, which after the fall in sin has become the default human position.

Subsequent to Article 24, we come to Articles 27–29, which speak about the church. This church is 'a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers [...] joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith' (Art. 27). In this holy gathering, believers are 'serving to build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body' (Art. 28). These believers can be recognised:

> [...] 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 Saviour, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbours, without turning to the right or left, and they crucify the flesh and its works. (Art. 29)

Everything in these citations speaks of restored human communion. The citation from Article 29 is especially pertinent: Christians will pursue righteousness once they have received the one and only Saviour, Jesus Christ. Thus, it is only through justification (being set right with God through the one Saviour, Jesus Christ) that all other righteousness can be pursued; it is only then that believers can love the true God and their neighbours.

Articles 30–32, then, speak about the government of this restored community. Crucial in the government of the church is that office-bearers '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' (Art. 31). The new community of believers is not

characterised by power struggles and infighting – as priests, they are called to serve. In fact, the new community is characterised by a spiritual order:

> [*T*]rue 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. (Art. 30)

For the church to be what it was designed to be – the restored community of believers, who serve one another and this world as priests – it needs to be built on the foundation of the restored relationship with God. And this happens solely through the finished work of Christ, imputed to sinners and accepted by faith. The doctrine of justification can therefore, quite rightly, be called the article by which the church stands or falls. The fact that our time poses different questions from those posed during the Reformation of the 16th century should not tempt us to reformulate this doctrine in order to merely serve our time. We can best serve our time by holding to the faith once delivered to the saints.

Regeneration and human access to the divine in contemporary theological and ethical thought: A reflection on the Belgic Confession Articles 24–26

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■ Introduction

Like all confessions, the Belgic Confession is highly contextual, written in a particular situation, for a particular audience, against particular threats. The question I am interested in, in keeping with the theme of this volume, is whether and how this confession can then still be relevant today, in different contexts, read by different audiences and facing different threats. As one of the accepted confessions of certain Reformed churches, the Belgic Confession is pertinent for every generation and for all contexts, and in this chapter this relevance is studied through an examination of

contemporary trends in theological thought and topical ethical questions that relate to the themes addressed in three articles, namely Article 24 (the sanctification of sinners), Article 25 (the fulfilment of the law) and Article 26 (the intercession of Christ).

In order to illustrate this relevance, I will first discuss the content of the three articles that are the focus on this chapter. Afterwards, I will explicitly turn to the relevance of the Belgic Confession by discussing some trends in contemporary systematic theology in which the content of Articles 24–26 features, as well as some topical ethical challenges where these notions can provide direction. In particular, the notions of regeneration and human access to the divine are stressed in the discussion as it relates to both the growing interest in the theme of human flourishing within systematic theology, as well as ethical thought on developing biotechnology and transhumanism.

■ Article 24: The sanctification of sinners

In a discussion of Article 24, it is impossible to disregard the preceding two articles on the justification by faith. Although this chapter will not focus on justification by faith, but rather the content of Articles 24–26, no discussion of sanctification can be had without also referring to justification. Berkouwer (1952) notes that:

> One who has pondered the far-reaching significance of the 'sola-fide' doctrine – justification by faith alone – is immediately faced with the question whether this cardinal concept does not make all further discussion superfluous […] Does not every addition […] weaken the radical nature of grace? (p. 17)

While stressing the heretical nature of antinomianism, he also reminds us that its origins are found in the gospel and that it at least aimed to 'be a reminder of what lies behind us, the truly finished work of Christ, the all-sufficient atonement which defies addition' (Berkouwer 1952, p. 17). If we can describe 'justification by grace through faith' (Migliore 2004, p. 239), then as the basis of Christian life, sanctification can be described as '*the process of growth in Christian love*' (Migliore 2004, p. 239; [*emphasis in the original*]).

Article 24, on the sanctification of sinners, starts by declaring:

> We believe that this true faith,
> Produced in us by the hearing of God's Word
> And by the work of the Holy Spirit
> Regenerates us and makes us new creatures,
> Causing us to live a new life
> And freeing us from the slavery of sin.

Calvin's interpretation of regeneration is linked with repentance, 'whose sole end is to restore in us the image of God that had been disfigured and

all but obliterated through Adam's transgression' (*Inst.* III.3.9). This is not a unique view amongst Reformed theologians, and Jones (2021, p. 220) indicates that a number of Reformers differentiated between regeneration on the one hand and effectual calling [*vocatio efficax*] on the other. Regeneration was explained by Rollock (1849, cited in Jones 2021, p. 220) as 'the beginning of our glorification, and the beginning of a new creature'.

Regeneration and the new life that Article 24 confesses can also be expressed as the theological term 'sanctification'. How sanctification and works are related is further confessed by the article:

> These works,
> Proceeding for the good root of faith,
> Are good and acceptable to God,
> Since they are all sanctified by God's grace.
> Yet they do not count toward our justification –
> For by faith in Christ we are justified,
> Even before we do good work. (Art. 24)

As well as later stating:

> So then, we do good works,
> But not for merit –
> For what would we merit?
> Rather, we are indebted to God for the good works we do,
> And not God to us. (Art. 24)

Of course, much can be said about the relationship between faith and works, which remains a relevant theological issue. This relationship also has implications for contemporary reflection on matters such as labour and vocation, for example. Vorster (2021, p. 165) notes that the definitive aim of labour sanctifies it, 'and what we achieve today with our daily task will be included in the re-created and restored new heaven and earth'. This does not mean that we are helping God prepare the new heaven and the new earth but that our daily task is included in it through God's work. This notion of labour being sanctified in the future suggests two forms that labour can take that are directly applicable to the discussion on the relationship between faith and works. On the one hand, labour or works can be theocentric in nature and point to God. On the other hand, labour or works can also be anthropocentric and point 'away from God to ourselves' (Vorster 2021, p. 165). The relationship between faith and works will not be the main focus of this chapter but will be returned to shortly. It serves here already, however, to indicate the relevance of the content of Article 24 of the Belgic Confession for contemporary theological discourse.

In the thought of Calvin, 'faith is not a work meriting God's pardon, but the instrument for receiving God's mercy offered to sinners in Jesus Christ' (Billings 2009, p. 433). This notion is also stressed in his understanding of sanctification, the theme of Article 24 of the Belgic Confession.

Among others, Strauss (1993) establishes the historical links between De Brès and Calvin and Calvin's influence on the Belgic Confession can also be seen here in Article 24. While the influence of Calvin on the Belgic Confession is often taken for granted (Strauss 1993, p. 502), Strauss (1993, p. 505) establishes the historical links as well as the general Calvinistic stamp carried by the document. One of the articles where this is particularly prominent is Article 22, on the justification by faith alone. As has already been mentioned, justification is not the topic of this chapter, but separating justification and sanctification, especially in Calvin's thought, cannot be done.

For Calvin, sanctification can be described as the process through which believers are more and more conformed to Christ by 'the continual re-making of the believer by the Holy Spirit' and 'the increasing consecration of body and soul to God' (Beeke 2004, p. 130). It is the soul's transformation, which can also be called regeneration. Salvation, in this sense, is articulated as the union with Christ. In Christ, believers share in the death [*mortification*] of Christ, as well as his resurrection [*vivification*], growing towards 'a perfection that in this life is never fully attained' (*Inst*. III.3.3). Certainly, it is true that:

> When we hear mention of our union with God, let us remember that holiness must be its bond; not because we come into communion with him by virtue of our holiness! [... *Rather*] we ought first to cleave unto him so that, infused with his holiness, we may follow whither he calls. (*Inst*. III.6.2)

In the thought of Calvin, as in the Belgic Confession, sanctification belongs together with justification, in particular concerning the faith of believers. If 'faith rests upon the knowledge of Christ' and 'Christ cannot be known apart from the sanctification of his Spirit', the conclusion must be reached 'that faith can in no [way] be separated from a devout disposition' (*Inst*. III.2.8). Calvin maintained 'that justification is inseparable from sanctification' (Billings 2009, p. 432). This does not mean, however, that justification and sanctification should be confused with one another, even when both are bestowed, through the grace of God, on believers (Jonker 1983, p. 67). This is also clear from the order of the articles in the Belgic Confession, where justification is discussed just prior to Article 24 on the sanctification of sinners. Justification is the act of God in Christ, which can be received by human beings only through faith. Sanctification, on the other hand, while just as much an act of God, is an action that believers are called upon to participate in. Jonker (1983, p. 191) states that sanctification, unlike justification, is an indicative as well as an imperative.

The order of justification and sanctification is therefore worth taking into account. It has already been noted that in the Belgic Confession, justification is discussed immediately prior to sanctification. This is also

similar to Calvin's thought; while he discussed justification after sanctification in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*' outline, Smit (2015, p. 13) notes that trying to pinpoint the structure of Calvin's thought and, subsequently, the relationship between justification and sanctification from this outline is 'a contested and deeply problematic approach', not taking into account the entire scope of Calvin's work or the fine distinctions and intricacies that should be accounted for in trying to construe the structure of Calvin's thought (Smit 2015, pp. 13–14). Jonker (1983, pp. 66–67) also remarks that for Calvin, sanctification remains the goal of justification. Sanctification is therefore not the basis of justification in Calvin's 1559 structure, but rather he stresses that justification through faith does not allow the believer to remain unchanged but necessarily leads to transformation (Jonker 1983, p. 66). All of our blessings, which include both justification and sanctification, are only to be found in Christ, through the Spirit, Calvin emphasises (*Inst*. III.16.1). To separate these two doctrines 'is to tear Christ in pieces' (*Inst*. II.11.6). The context for both is then the union with Christ, even if, as Billings (2009) remarks, that doctrinal locus is not articulated by Calvin. Union with Christ, however, is expressed through a number of different images, such as participation, ingrafting, adoption and others (Billings 2009, p. 429).

Marais (2015) remarks that the variety of metaphors employed by Calvin in describing the notion of union with Christ, together with:

> […] his concern for a clear and coherent interpretation not only of justification and sanctification, but also for the relationship between these two doctrines, reveals his pedagogical, pastoral and political strategies in his thinking on salvation. (p. 60)

For Calvin, she notes, when salvation does not 'also lead to public, political, practical acts of service, in (grateful and obedient) response to God's grace' (Marais 2015, p. 60), it means that neither the profound despair and misery that God's salvation frees us from, nor the degree of the comfort that salvation brings, has been grasped (Marais 2015, p. 60).

The relevance of the Belgic Confession will be addressed in the second part of this chapter, but here already, it becomes clear that doctrinal reflection has concrete and practical implications for our daily lives. How we understand and confess, for example, the sanctification of sinners, the subject matter of Article 24, has to influence our behaviour, thoughts and actions. The link between faith and works therefore remains a highly relevant act of theological reflection, but also stresses the practical implications of Christian doctrine.

Other theologians have also addressed the relationship between faith and works at the hand of the doctrine of sanctification. For Jonker, sanctification is 'the fruits of the faith' and 'the works of faith' (1968, p. 142), which are both

expressions of human love to God. It is of the same importance as justification, given that '[o]ur works bear testimony to the reality of our justification through faith' (Jonker 1968, p. 142). Our good works of faith do not thereby become 'the ground for our justification' (Jonker 1968, p. 142) or meritorious, however, which Article 24 of the Belgic Confession also stresses. Instead, Jonker (1968, p. 143) notes that sanctification is the invitation to believers who have been justified by grace in faith to live lives that are worthy of this grace bestowed upon them. For Jonker, Marais (2015, p. 129; [*emphasis in the original*]; cf. Jonker 1994, p. 40) remarks, sanctification then refers to 'living from *gratitude* toward God (for salvation) into *holiness* (within the new life that salvation has granted)'. Or, as the Belgic Confession Article 24 puts it, to live as new creatures.

Sanctification, however, cannot be limited only to the personal and individual (Jonker 1994, p. 41). Similar to Calvin, as previously noted, Jonker (1989, p. 298) also states that sanctification has to be both public and external and valid for the life of believers, encompassing all facets of life; ecclesial, public and political (Jonkers 1994, p. 41). Sanctification for Jonker, Marais indicates (2015, p. 129), 'has to do with the longing for the visible manifestation of the signs and coming of God's kingdom, and with the reign of Christ in the whole of life'. Put differently, salvation is not understood as distinct from this life on Earth, but rather as the restoration of this life to be what God had meant for it (Jonker 1994, p. 44). The law of God especially has meaning for all of life and all of life's contexts (Jonker 1994, p. 46). The law is then discussed in the next article of the Belgic Confession and in the following section of this chapter.

Article 24 of the Belgic Confession, on the sanctification of sinners and dealing with the regeneration of believers into new creatures, and the doing of good works that do not count towards our justification, is a confession about salvation. As stated in this section, in both Calvin and Jonker's views, salvation does not only have to do with our spiritual and religious lives but with every facet of our existence, including the public and the political. As such, it remains extremely relevant to reflect on our understanding thereof. The Belgic Confession offers such a reflection in Article 24. In the second part of this chapter, the particular relevance will be returned to.

■ Article 25: The fulfilment of the law

Article 25 on the fulfilment of the law might strike contemporary readers as rather strange in terms of content, but Janssen (2016, p. 87) indicates that 'De Brès set it in just the right place here'. This is because it both recapitulates the work of Christ in history and specifies the works of the justified and regenerated believer (Janssen 2016, p. 87). The ceremonial laws of the Torah ('the ceremonies and symbols of the law' in Art. 25) are distinguished

from the moral laws; the ceremonial laws are fulfilled in Christ, but the fulfilment is what is vital, what the intention was of these laws for Israel's liturgical life, restoring the community through the sacrificial system. This has been attained by the death of Jesus Christ 'as a sacrificial offering on behalf of the human' (Janssen 2016, p. 87).

Article 25 of the Belgic Confession states:

> We believe
> that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ended
> 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 the truth and substance of these things
> remain for us in Jesus Christ,
> in whom they have been fulfilled.

The priestly act whereby sin is removed, we confess in the death of Jesus Christ, and 'given the identity of the priest (and victim)' (Janssen 2016, p. 88), it is an act that does not need to be repeated. The offering that Christ brought, 'his own blood was once and for all' (Erickson 2013, p. 85). The forgiveness of sin and, accordingly, the justification and sanctification of sinners that the previous article speaks of, is a completed act and Christians need not do works to be deserving of it (Janssen 2016, p. 88).

'Christ's fulfillment of the law', Vorster (2021, p. 233) remarks, is also the light in which to interpret the Decalogue, which is 'the plan of action for Christians as transforming moral agents in their quest for the flourishing personhood embedded in God's gift of life to all persons'. The notion of the fulfilment of the law, the abolishment of the 'ceremonies and symbols of the law' because the 'truth and substance' remains in Jesus Christ, therefore also remains highly relevant in terms of theological ethics, a notion which will be addressed in the second part of this chapter.

■ Article 26: The intercession of Christ

Article 26 confesses Christ's role as 'Mediator and Intercessor', noting:

> We believe that we have no access to God
> except through the one and only Mediator and Intercessor,
> 'Jesus Christ the righteous',
> who therefore was made human,
> 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.

De Graaff refers to the present reality where the resources of many churches and congregations are declining, fewer ministry positions are filled and 'the

energy of clergy spread ever more thinly' (2016, p. 504). Faced with this context, appealing to the priesthood of all believers in order to argue for an increase in lay ministry, he remarks, overlooks the importance of this concept (De Graaff 2016, p. 504), and he stresses intercession 'as a fundamental aspect of priesthood' (De Graaff 2016, p. 505) and of Christ's priesthood in the first place.

Intercession is also an act on behalf of someone else, someone who is faced with a threat (De Graaff 2016, p. 508). Based also on Christ's intercession, where his 'role in the Paschal drama of cross, death and resurrection [...] could be described as the *ultimate* act of intercession' (De Graaff 2016, p. 209; [*emphasis in the original*]), the link between intercession and atonement is also obvious. As such, the content of Article 26 ties in with the content of the previous two articles of the Belgic Confession in that it has to do with soteriology. It is also closely related to Article 23 on justification, which precedes the three articles that are the focus of this chapter.

Christ's intercession on our behalf, Beeke (2004, p. 130) indicates, results in justification, where the justice of God and the requirements of salvation are satisfied. For Calvin, it is on the basis of the mystical unity with Christ [*unio mystica cum Christo*] that humanity is justified in Christ (Jonker 1983, p. 64). We can therefore say that justification is 'the soil out of which the Christian life develops' and 'the substance of piety' (Beeke 2004, p. 130), which is the result of Christ interceding on our behalf.

A further theme that comes to the fore in Article 26 is the notion of access to God, or 'access to the divine Majesty'. This is especially relevant for topical ethical reflection on the relevance of the Belgic Confession for today, which is explored in the following section.

■ The relevance of the Belgic Confession

It was previously remarked that salvation, and especially the law of God, carries meaning for all of life and all of life's contexts[164] (Jonker 1994, p. 46). Seen in such a manner, the relevance of Articles 24–26 of the Belgic Confession is also stressed as I come to the second section of this chapter, where I wish to turn explicitly to the focus of this volume, namely the relevance of the Belgic Confession. I want to start by stressing that Dogmatics, as a deeply practical discipline, remains as relevant as ever. This includes the contents of the Belgic Confession and Articles 24–26. What we

164. While this statement of Jonker is made on soteriology rather than the Belgic Confession, in a discussion on the Belgic Confession, it should be noted that this idea is an interpretation of the Belgic Confession rather than one being found in the Belgic Confession itself.

believe and confess must necessarily influence our practices, behaviour and actions, which include every facet of Christian ministry, as well as the way we live our everyday lives.

The practical function of doctrine is also stressed by Jones (1995) in her analysis of Calvin's *Institutes*, where she notes that the task of the theologian, for Calvin, 'is inherently practical' in that it is concerned with pedagogy:

> […] teaching persons 'truths' that lead to faith [… *which*] is not based upon high-flown speculation but rather is rooted in the heart and manifest in the activities of daily living. (p. 27)

Stated differently, Calvin notes that '[t]he theologian's task is not to divert the ears with chatter but strengthen consciences by teaching things true, sure and profitable' (*Inst*. I.14.4). This was also stressed earlier.

In his introduction to Dogmatics, which takes the Belgic Confession as its point of departure, Heyns (1992, pp. 2–3) stresses a number of important factors in such a dogmatic discussion, including exegetical, historical, ethical, kerygmatic and apologetic aspects. 'In any discussion about sanctification', Berkouwer (1952) states:

> […] it is evident that we are concerned, not with a maze of theoretical abstractions, but with the bread-and-butter problems of this life. One can even say that a discussion about sanctification is the more relevant because also the unbeliever evinces interest in what the church professes in the matter.
>
> […] For he detects in this teaching a presumptuous note, the pretension, namely, of being saintly, of being different. And of course, this pretension seems to the accuser entirely unwarranted. The confession that the believer is justified by faith alone seems not to interest the unbeliever; the pretension of being different so much the more. Here at least is room for scrutiny, a chance to put Christianity on trial. Is this sanctification indeed a radiant reality crowding out the darkness? (pp. 9–10)

'The believer can, of course, shrug off these questions and say that that the unsanctified can never in his life understand the true significance of sanctification', Berkouwer (1952) continues, adding:

> Be that as it may, but he had better remind himself that the Scriptures are very emphatic about the convection between the goods works and the scrutiny of the world. (p. 10)

The continued relevance of the Belgic Confession and Article 24 for theological discussions on sanctification can also be illustrated by reference to the fairly recent upsurge in theological reflection on the theme of human flourishing, which is then often closely related to sanctification. One example of this is the Yale Centre for Faith and Culture's leading project on 'God and Human Flourishing'. Over the past couple of years, a variety of themes have been explored under this umbrella heading, including 'Christ and Human Flourishing' (2008), 'Happiness and Human Flourishing' (2011),

'Joy and Human Flourishing' (2012), 'Christ and Human Flourishing' (2014), 'Life Worth Living' (2018) and others. This trend can also be seen within the South African theological landscape: for example, Marais's 2014 doctoral (PhD) dissertation, 'Imagining human flourishing? A systematic theological exploration of contemporary soteriological discourses' and Vorster's (2021) recently published *The gift of life: Towards an ethic of flourishing personhood*. In this work, Vorster (2021, p. 4; [*emphasis in the original*]) notes that he 'aims to delineate the broad concept "*ethic of life*" into an ethic of flourishing personhood'.

Despite this upsurge in reflection on human thriving and flourishing,[165] Charry (2010, p. 275) remarks that flourishing or happiness as a theme is not viewed as a Christian doctrine in and of itself within systematic theology. Theological reflection on the theme of happiness tends to be grouped under eschatology, especially 'future eschatology at the expense of temporal happiness' (Charry 2010, p. 275). In contrast to these views, Charry (2010, p. x) herself makes the decision to situate her reflection on flourishing in sanctification, more specifically suggesting 'that happiness is a realising eschatology with salvation centered in sanctification'. Sanctification and the content of Article 24 of the Belgic Confession, then, have much relevance for contemporary theological discussion.

Lastly, turning to the ethical dimension of Article 24, Heyns (1992, p. 289) also indicates that the whole of human ethical life is placed within the perspective of sanctification by this article; the manner in which human beings are treated, both the self and the other, has to do with the sanctification of life, the isolation from the world and the devotion to God. Living an ethical life in obedience to the Word of God is part of the renewal of human beings according to the image of God (Heyns 1992, p. 289). Christ's fulfilment of the laws, as stated in Article 25, also carries meaning for the ethical life of the individual believer, who is freed from slavish obedience to the letter of the law but also becomes able to style the life of gratitude in a responsible manner (Heyns 1992, p. 297).

One contemporary ethical issue where sanctification comes strongly to the fore can be found in the blanket term transhumanism, which encompasses a variety of biotechnological endeavours aimed at improving what it means to be human or, as is evident from the name, to transcend the limitations and weaknesses of human beings. A number of indirect lines

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165. Marais (2014, p. 311) discusses one of the points of criticism directed at the rhetoric of human flourishing, namely that the language utilised focuses on 'wealth and health above all else'. In short, the objection can be raised that this is the terminology of prosperity theology or the theology of success. However, the rhetoric of human flourishing need not be equated with either wealth or health; soteriology, Marais (2014, p. 313) remarks, 'is concerned with life and flourishing – but not for life or flourishing over and against death or sickness'. The language of flourishing in this regard is concerned with the affirmation of life.

can be drawn between the doctrine of sanctification as the continual re-making of the person, the regeneration of being increasingly conformed to Christ and becoming 'new creatures', and the new transhuman creatures envisaged by transhumanism. However, examples can also be found of such direct lines, with Coeckelbergh, for example, placing transhumanism within the human desire to improve and become better, as well as what he terms the Christian notion of growing towards perfection.

Saniotis defines transhumanism as an ideology that argues human beings in the future will be 'radically different' (2011, p. 156) as a result of biotechnological intervention. While these 'radically different new creatures' are undoubtedly not what the Belgic Confession had in mind when referring to new creatures being regenerated and glorified, there are some comparable approaches between transhumanism and the Christian tradition. Both 'do not deem the body as being a static corporeal entity, but rather as dynamic' (Saniotis 2011, p. 158); human bodies are composed of different components, matter and spirit (and some would add the soul as a separate component).

While the impact of Greek dualism resulted in the notion of the body being less important than the spirit or soul in traditional Christian thought, in terms of spiritual transformation, 'the whole body is important' (Saniotis 2011, p. 159). Theological and Christian ethical reflection on transhumanism also points to the relevance of the Belgic Confession in terms of what Article 26 describes as 'access to God' or 'access to the divine Majesty'. An essential part of Christianity, Saniotis mentions, is striving towards perfection (Saniotis 2011, p. 164). This perfection 'focuses on cleansing the soul so that its nature mirrors the nature of God' (Saniotis 2011, p. 164) or 'to become godlike' (Saniotis 2011, p. 164). The traditional answer to striving for excellence, propagated by thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle and Hegel, all underlined the pursuit of becoming as godlike as possible (Campbell & Walker 2005, p. vi). Migliore (2004, p. 240) also defines sanctification as the process of being 'conformed to the image of Christ'.

The notion of intercession that Article 26 of the Belgic Confession discusses also remains highly relevant. The priesthood of all believers was mentioned earlier in the discussion of this article. De Graaff (2016, p. 505) indicates that the 'priesthood of Christians is modelled on the priesthood of Christ'. As was noted previously, an important aspect of Christ's priesthood is intercession. In modelling ourselves upon Christ, the notion of becoming like Christ comes to the fore, which is also very pertinent to the present discussion on transhumanism.

Campbell and Walker (2005, p. vii) remark on the idea of Christians being children of God and indicate that appealing to this notion results in an intuitive account of 'our love, respect and closeness to God'. It also

implies, however, that children grow up to become similar to their parents in some respects; in other words, 'taken literally, this idea implies that upon maturity we too should be gods' (Campbell & Walker 2005, p. vii). For this reason, they note that the issue of transhumanism comes to the fore, offering the opportunity for improvement and enhancement to become more like God (Campbell & Walker 2005, p. vii).

From the viewpoint of the Christian tradition, Hart (2005, p. 70) indicates, there is 'nothing inherently wicked in the desire to become a god'. In fact, while he finds the ideas of transhumanists 'contemptible', Hart (2005, p. 70) expresses admiration for 'the earnestness with which it gives expression to this perfectly natural longing' to become godlike. The proper destiny of humanity, from a theological perspective, is to be glorified in Christ, 'to become "partakers of the divine nature [2 Pt 1:4], to be called 'gods'" [Ps 82:6; Jn 10:34–36]' (Hart 2005, p. 70).

While the end goal that transhumanism envisages when striving towards an enhanced humanity might differ from the Christian notion of glorification or striving towards perfection and becoming more like God, the relevance of the Belgic Confession in reflecting on these aspects comes to the fore again. In addressing the claims of transhumanism, Articles 24–26 of the Belgic Confession contain not only an ethical dimension but also an apologetic one.

Cole-Turner (2016) states:

> [B]ecause of Christian theology's conviction about the faithfulness of God's plan to unite all things in Christ, it is suspicious of any claim for the ultimacy or perfection of any future state of creation. No ideologically defined or technologically attained perfection is possible. In response to mid-nineteenth-century Marxist pretensions, Rahner rejected any effort to define a final or perfect state. Of course there is a world of difference between mid-nineteenth-century Marxism and today's transhumanists, who cannot be accused of having an ideology of perfection or of defending the claim that some future state will be so complete that it will be the final state of nature. But as we think about transhumanism, Rahner's criticism is a helpful reminder. Theology's insistence that the last things cannot be identified with any set of future things reminds us to sit lightly with any claims of improvement or progress, much less claims of perfection. (p. 28)

The manner in which Article 24 of the Belgic Confession confesses sanctification also guards against such claims and serves also to stress again the relevance of this article for contemporary theology, Christian ethics and apologetics.

The notion of intercession confessed by Article 26 further adds the notion of interceding for others, speaking for those who are unable to speak for themselves. One of the most convincing arguments against transhumanism, to my mind, lies in the inequality that it cannot help but exacerbate. Should the technologies that advocates of transhumanism

dream of become available, they would undoubtedly only be available to some; those who are able to access them and those who are able to afford them (putting aside for the moment whether these so-called improvements would in fact be improvements or, indeed, desirable). Intercession, therefore, not only stresses the continued relevance of the Belgic Confession but also the ethical necessity for believers to speak for those who would not only be unable to utilise these forms of biotechnology but might very well be exploited in the development thereof (Kotzé 2019, p. 63).

■ Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued for the relevance of Christian doctrine in general and Articles 24–26 of the Belgic Confession in particular. The implication is that, as one of the accepted confessions of the Protestant Church, the Belgic Confession remains relevant for every generation and for all contexts. In this chapter, I examined this relevance by examining a contemporary trend in theological thought and a topical ethical question related to the themes addressed in three articles, namely Articles 24 (the sanctification of sinners), 25 (the fulfilment of the law) and 26 (the intercession of Christ).

In the first part of this chapter, I discussed the content of these three articles. In the second part, I illustrated the relevance of these articles by discussing a current trend in contemporary systematic theology in which the content of Articles 24–26 features, namely the upsurge in reflection on the theme of human flourishing within systematic theology. I also noted some topical ethical challenges where these themes can provide direction. In particular, the notions of regeneration and human access to the divine were stressed in the discussion as it relates to both the theme of human flourishing within systematic theology and ethical thought on developing biotechnology and transhumanism.

Chapter 9

Towards a relevant ecclesiology: An exposition of Articles 27–29 of the Belgic Confession

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◼ Introduction

This contribution will focus on Articles 27, 28 and 29 of the Belgic Confession that articulated something of 16th-century Reformed ecclesiology and doctrine of the church. Some attention will be given to (1) the influence of Calvin's ecclesiology on the relevant articles; (2) questions of intertextuality; (3) some theological reflection on Reformed ecclesiology as articulated by the Belgic Confession; and (4) the relevance of 16th-century Reformed ecclesiology at the start of the 21st century. The question of relevance is obvious. The Belgic Confession is almost five centuries old. At the same time, Reformed churches all over the world are under pressure. The hypothesis of this contribution is that 16th-century ecclesiology and confessions should be understood within the historical context of the 16th century, challenging contemporary Reformed churches to determine to what extent ancient documents should still determine

ecclesial practice. The trajectory of the argumentation is, in short, an attempt to show that Articles 27–28 are still relevant but in need of fundamental reinterpretation.

The history of the Belgic Confession is closely linked to the events surrounding the 'Church under the Cross' in the southern Netherlands (Beck 2016, p. 25). From 1550 onwards, the Dutch Reformation movement became more and more oriented towards Calvin. The early phase of the Dutch Reformation was characterised by great diversity; therefore, it is quite remarkable how the Dutch Reformation became increasingly influenced by the theology of John Calvin (see Dreyer 2020a, p. 1). This was to be expected, as the influence of Calvin was spreading all over Europe, although not everywhere with the same enthusiasm. Support for Calvin's ideas and theology fluctuated (Pettegree 2006, pp. 207–224). Sometimes, his advice was ignored, for example, in his opposition to more new confessions, including the attempt of De Brès (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1980, p. 10).

In the Walloon town of Tournai (Doornik), under the leadership of the Calvinist preacher Pierre Brully, the influence of Luther weakened in favour of Calvin. This continued under the leadership of De Brès, who settled in Doornik in 1559. Before settling in Doornik, De Brès studied for some time with Calvin and Theodore Beza in Geneva. The growing influence of Calvin is confirmed by events that took place on 15 October 1561, when Gilles Espringalles was arrested in Doornik for possession of Calvin's books, in both French and Latin (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1980, p. 7). Two weeks later, on 02 November 1561, a sealed package was found at the gate of the citadel in Doornik, which contained a letter from De Brès as well as a printed booklet under the title *Confession de Foy*, 'produced through the common accord of the faithful dispersed through the Netherlands'[166] (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1980, p. 1). In a report to the king, dated 19 December 1561, the *Confession de Foy* is described as 'full of the heresies and false doctrine of Calvin' (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1980, p. 7). The *Confession de Foy*, stating the obvious, became known as the *Confessio Belgica* or Belgic Confession.

■ The text

Strauss (1993, p. 505) comes to the conclusion (following Doekes and Bakhuizen van den Brink) that the text of the Belgic Confession grew,

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166. '*Confession de Foy faicte d'un commun accord par les fidèles qui conversent es pays bas* […]'. For the purpose of this contribution, the two editions of Bakhuizen van den Brink (1940, p. 1976) of the text of the Belgian Confession were used and referenced.

almost organically, from a draft confession presented by Calvin to the Synod of Paris in 1559.

Only two copies of the 1561 French text of De Brès's *Confession de Foy* still exist today. This text should be regarded as the original. Since 1561, the text of the *Confession de Foy* saw many editions, printed in different cities and in different languages. Some of these texts underwent minor changes, mostly in terms of editing and in translation. In terms of content, it remained essentially unchanged (see history of these translations and editions in Bakhuizen van den Brink 1980, pp. 11–21).

The Synod of Dort, from 29 April 1619 (Sessions 144–146), discussed the Belgic Confession and concluded that none of the articles in it could be regarded as 'contrary to Scripture' (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1980, p. 27). The Synod also ordered a simultaneous edition of the French, Latin and Dutch texts of the Belgic Confession, as an authentic text. However, the Latin translation could not be completed in time. This delay resulted in the approval of only the Dutch and French texts as 'official', while the Latin translation had only secondary authority. Most modern translations use the French text of the Synod of Dort as primary source.

◾ Calvin's ecclesiology

Calvin's influence on the Belgic Confession is clear (Strauss 1993, p. 501). The Belgic Confession is based on the draft of 35 articles prepared by Calvin for the 1559 Synod of Paris (Neuser 1980, p. 296). As a result, an analysis of the content and structure of Articles 27–29 must take into account Calvin's ecclesiology. For the purpose of this contribution, it could be no more than a few cursory remarks, as the church was central in all of Calvin's writing and in his struggle to reshape the church in Geneva (Small 2009, p. 2). The movement away from the Roman Catholic Church posed fundamental questions: what is the nature of the church? What are the marks of the true church? Why is the reformation of the church necessary?

The importance of the doctrine of the church is highlighted by the fact that one-third of the *Institutes* is devoted to ecclesiology, and the same is true in terms of the Belgic Confession. In no fewer than nine articles (Arts. 27–36), the Belgic Confession addresses issues pertaining to the church, including the relationship between church and government, sacraments, discipline, ecclesial offices, governance, marks of the church, unity of the church and the nature of the church. In the French Confession, we also find nine articles pertaining to the church, but in a different order. The difference between the two confessions is mainly that the Belgic Confession chose to follow the structure of Calvin's *Institutes* (Battles 1980, pp. 281–351; Strauss 1993, p. 511). The importance of the church as part of God's salvific works is

also quite clear in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, where it follows Calvin (*Inst*. IV.1.4.) in repeating the well-known expression attributed to Cyprian, namely *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*. The conviction that no salvation is possible without the church should be understood in context of the Anabaptists' rejection of a 'true church' (Graafland 1989, pp. 41–43).

Calvin did not attend to ecclesiology and the doctrine of the church as a learned academic, working in the peaceful and quiet environment of a study. The practicalities of reforming the Genevan church, which had had a Roman Catholic bishop since 379 AD, required 'getting your hands dirty'. In his last letter to William Farel (02 May 1564), Calvin summarised all his labours and theological enterprise as a 'service to the church' (see Van't Spijker 1990, p. 145). However, there is an important caveat: for Calvin, being church is all about serving Christ. It is not about maintaining an institution but serving the living body of Christ.

One would be mistaken to limit Calvin's enormous contribution to ecclesiology to Book IV of his *Institutes*. His understanding of the church surfaces in all his writings, especially his commentaries and smaller writings (Van't Spijker 1990, p. 143). One of the best-known of these writings is Calvin's 1539 letter to Cardinal Sadoleto,[167] archbishop of Carpentras, in which he defends the reformation of the church in Geneva. He points out the changes in ceremonies, sacraments and discipline, but above all, the centrality of the Word of God. In his letter to Sadoleto, Calvin's concern is the visible church, with all its limitations and faults. Calvin rejects the definition Sadoleto gave of the church as the community of those who live in complete unity all over the world, led by the Spirit of Christ. He compares this definition with the Anabaptist ecclesiology that boasts of the Spirit on the grave of the Word. Over and against this, Calvin regarded the church as a communion of saints, dispersed over the whole Earth and all ages, united by the teaching of Christ through the Spirit, always seeking unity in faith and brotherly love. This church is the mother of the faithful (Van't Spijker 1990, p. 154). Only in truth, and in obedience to the Word, would true unity become a reality. Unity is not to be found in ecclesial structures (as in the Roman Catholic Church) but in obedience to the Word.

He also addressed these issues in his 1543 letter to Emperor Charles V (known as *De Necessitate Reformandae Ecclesiae*[168]). Martin Bucer asked him to present the emperor with a defence of the Reformation movement, as it was the emperor's outspoken intent to protect the medieval concept of universal monarchy from the Protestant Reformation. Calvin's open

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167. Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* (CO) V.385 ff.

168. Calvin, CO VI.457 ff.

letter was an attempt to convince the emperor that the church needed reformation and that the emperor had an important role to play in the process of church reformation (Dreyer 2017, p. 55). In his letter, Calvin gave a short summary of the 'evils' which threatened the church. This boils down to (1) false worship and (2) false doctrine. He gave various examples, for instance the veneration of saints.

Calvin gives an extensive explanation of the remedies required. These relate to the *notae ecclesiae*, that is, preaching, sacraments and discipline (see Art. 29 of the Belgic Confession). First and foremost, preaching should become the most important part of the ceremonies. Preaching was a powerful means by which the church could be reformed, because true preaching fosters true faith and the eradication of superstition. He says:

> In our churches, only God is adored in pious form without superstition; since his goodness, wisdom, power, truth, and other perfections are there preached more fully than anywhere else; since he is invoked with true faith in the name of Christ, his mercies celebrated both with heart and tongue, and men constantly urged to a simple and sincere obedience.[169]

Secondly (Dreyer 2017):

> Calvin points out that the celebration of the sacraments [*should be*] restructured in accordance with Scripture. This included reducing the number of sacraments to only two and removing superfluous and useless additions […] [*Calvin also specifically addressed the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation*.] Contrary to scholastic theology, Calvin rejects the notion that the efficacy of the sacraments is to be found in the visible signs of the sacraments. The sacraments are effective through Christ alone […] He points out that the [*practice should be*] remedied […] by removing all ceremonial practices which would point to the Lord's Supper as a sacrificial rite and banishing the fiction of transubstantiation.[170] (pp. 59–60)

Calvin also gives specific attention to discipline pertaining to the ministers. Being a minister of the Word could never be about privilege, power or financial gain.[171] This does not mean that Calvin expected moral perfection, as he (Mudge 2008):

> […] was quite aware of the fact that the [*C*]hurch is not perfect, that it is a *corpus permixtum* and that we should never be too self-assured in our estimate of the visible Church. (p. 613)

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169. Calvin, CO VI.474–475: '*Quum ergo adoretur in ecclesiis nostris unus Deus puro ritu, et absque ulla superstitione, quumeius bonitas, sapientia, potentia, veritas et reliquae virtutes uberius, quam alibi usquam praedicentur, quum vera fide invocetur in Christi nomine, quum celebrentur eius beneficia et animis et linguis, quum ad simplicem sinceramque eius obedientiam perpetuo revocentur homines*'.

170. Calvin, CO VI.489: '*Ad transsubstantiationis commentum, ad morem item custodiendi et gestandi panis damnandum, maior nos impulit nécessitas*'.

171. Calvin, CO VI.490–497.

Dreyer (2017, p. 61) adds that '[...s]in does not detract from the fact that [church remains] the visible body of Christ. Church members need to be educated through catechesis in the true meaning of the sacraments and how to maintain a Christian lifestyle.

Turning to Calvin's *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques*[172] (Potter & Greengrass 1983, pp. 71–76), it is clear that Calvin's understanding of church governance is built on his ecclesiology. Calvin revised the 1537 Ordinances in 1541, after he returned to Geneva from Strasbourg (Pont 1981, p. 21). It was again revised in 1561, the year the Belgic Confession was completed. Looking at the 1561 text (see Pont 1981, pp. 22–47), the centrality of the Word is conspicuous. Ecclesial discipline ensures the preaching of the gospel and catechesis, so that all the citizens of Geneva could maintain a Christian lifestyle. To this purpose, the Ordinances are divided in three sections: the service of the offices (minister, doctor, elder and deacon); the service of the congregation (sacraments, worship, marriage, funerals, ministry to the sick and prisoners); and discipline (including the confirmation of young people after catechesis, house visits by ministers and elders to determine if congregants are ready to celebrate Holy Communion, dividing the congregation into wards in accordance with the City regulations and, lastly, punishment for specific instances of disobedience).

Pont (1981, p. 47) comes to the conclusion that the Ordinances cannot be regarded as a true representation of Calvin's ecclesiology, because the civil authorities had much influence in the structure and content of the Ordinances, especially in terms of marriage. Despite this, it is clear that Calvin did his utmost to structure the church in terms of scriptural principles. Above all, the proclamation of the Word of God is the essence and existence of the church. The church is and remains *creatura Verbi*. This is also the fundamental point of departure in the Belgic Confession.

Turning to Calvin's *Institutes*,[173] the first striking correlation with the Belgic Confession is the order of themes. Starting with the true nature of the church (*Inst*. IV.1; Belgic Confession Art. 27–28); it moves on to the distinction between the true and the false church (*Inst*. IV.2; Belgic Confession Art. 29); the offices and governance of the church (*Inst*. IV.3–IV.11; Belgic Confession Art. 30–31); ecclesial discipline and censure (*Inst*. IV.12; Belgic Confession Art. 32); the sacraments (*Inst*. IV.13–IV.19; Belgic Confession Art. 33–35); church and government (*Inst*. IV.20; Belgic Confession Art. 36). From this comparative overview, it is quite clear that

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172. See JF Bergier and RM Kingdon's *Registres de la Compagnie des pasteurs de Geneve au temps de Calvin*.

173. For the purpose of this contribution, the translations of Battles (1960) and Simpson (1991) were used. They are listed under Calvin 1559 and referenced per chapter in accordance with international practice.

the Belgic Confession follows the structure, sequence and content of book IV of the *Institutes*. The one very substantial omission from the Confession, compared to the *Institutes*, is Calvin's extensive polemic against the Roman Catholic Church interwoven in Book IV. The Belgic Confession contains only limited direct references to the Roman Catholic Church, although the whole Belgic Confession is fundamentally apologetic and polemical in nature.

■ Intertextuality

■ Relation to early creeds

No confession appears out of thin air. All confessional texts are interdependent and should be interpreted in terms of other texts. When we examine the texts of the Reformed confessions of the 16th century, it is quite clear that they are founded upon the ecumenical creeds of the early church (see following discussion), as well as being dependent on each other.

It is remarkable that the early creeds did not include articles on the church. The early church struggled to reach consensus on the doctrine of the Trinity, and more specifically, Christology. The doctrine of the church was a later addition to the ecumenical creeds. For instance, a letter from Eusebius of Caesarea, written shortly after the first ecumenical council (Nicaea, 325 AD), includes the Nicene Creed, without any articles on the church (Schaff & Wace 1999b, pp. 74–76). However, early variants of the Nicene Creed that circulated did contain some references to the church. One example was the catechetical material which Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, used to prepare the catechumens for baptism. It included an extended form of the Nicene Creed (see Gifford [1893] 1999, pp. xlvi–xlvii, cited in Schaff & Wace 1999c, pp. 133–138). The Jerusalem variant included an article on the church. This was formalised when the second ecumenical council (Constantinople, 381 AD), where Cyril of Jerusalem was present, worked with the Jerusalem text and adopted a reworked version, which included Cyril's phrase 'εἰς μίαν ἁγίαν καθολικὴν καὶ ἀποστολικὴν ἐκκλησίαν' (see Schaff & Wace 1999d, p. 163). It was confirmed by the fourth ecumenical council (Chalcedon, 451 AD). In this formulation, we find the fourfold attributes of the true church: '[we believe] one, holy, catholic and apostolic church'.

Since the middle of the fourth century, the church became an essential part of Christian doctrine. There were several reasons for this development. First and foremost, the church grew very quickly, both numerically and geographically (Dreyer 2012; Schor 2009). Christian communities established themselves from India in the east to Britain in the west. This resulted in growing diversity and independence from each other. Unity in doctrine and

practice became major obstacles. These challenges were exemplified by the Donatist controversy, with Augustine as the central figure. In the tenth chapter of Augustine's *De fide et symbolo* (dated approximately 393 AD), he refers to false teachers and schismatics who refer to themselves as 'the true Church' (Schaff & Wace 1999a, pp. 331–333). These pretentions required some reflection on what the marks of the true church would be and how it could be formulated in terms of doctrine and in the creeds.

This tradition, to regard the church as an essential part of Christian doctrine, was continued by the various 16th-century Reformation movements. In fact, the doctrine of the church received an extraordinary amount of attention because of the fact that the Reformation of the church was the central issue on the agenda. It seems that whenever the church came under pressure, it was regarded as an essential part of Christian doctrine and confession of faith.

However, to believe *in* God is fundamentally different from believing 'a holy, catholic church'. The translations of the creeds always differentiate between believing *in* God and the belief that the Christian church is one, holy and catholic (universal).

■ Relation to other 16th-century confessions

During the 16th-century Reformation, different cities adopted a wide array of confessions (see Dreyer 1997). The development of Reformed confessions could metaphorically be regarded as a chain, interlinking and overlapping each other. We know that those theologians who were instructed to work on a particular confession often made use of existing confessions and catechisms. The work of Guido de Brès and the Belgic Confession are no exception. The most obvious document which assisted De Brès was the French Confession, as explained above. If we understand the Belgic Confession as part of a chain of confessions, the interrelatedness could be illustrated with a few examples. Alasdair Heron (2014) gave a brief overview of Calvin and the 16th-century Reformed confessions. He builds his argument on the earlier contributions of Niesel, Cochrane, Plasger and Freudenberg (Heron 2014, p. 3).

■ Ten Theses of Berne (1528)

The Reformed theologians of the 16th century had a particular understanding of the church (Small 2009, p. 2). It begins not with the church itself, but with Christ. In the words of the Ten Theses of Berne of 1528 (Cochrane 1966):

> The holy Christian Church, whose only head is Christ [*see Belgic Confession Article 29*], is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger. (p. 49)

The church begins with the Word of God; it is *creatura Verbi*. This word is the living Word, Jesus Christ, revealed to us in Holy Scripture. Through the Word and the power of the Holy Spirit, the church exists.

As early as 1528, two major tenets in the doctrine of the church emerged: firstly, Christ is the only head of the church, and secondly, the church exists as a Word event.

■ The Tetrapolitan Confession (1530)

The Tetrapolitan Confession (see text in Cochrane 1966, pp. 51–90) is quite an extensive document. It was presented by Bucer and Wolfgang Capito of Strasbourg to the Diet of Augsburg, which the emperor had convened in Augsburg. Various parties presented their confessions to the emperor: Melanchthon (*Confessio Augustana*), Zwingli (*Fidei Ratio*) and Bucer (Tetrapolitan Confession) submitted their texts, but they were immediately refuted by Roman Catholic theologians like Johann Eck and Peter Faber. It seems that the whole intention of the emperor with the Diet of Augsburg was to have the opportunity to refute the doctrines of the various Reformed movements. It is remarkable that the Tetrapolitan Confession was intentionally positioned between Luther and Zwingli in an attempt to create greater unity between the various movements within the Reformation (Cochrane 1966, p. 52). We must remember that Calvin spent quite some time in Strasbourg after he was banned from Geneva, and came under the influence of Bucer.

The doctrine of the church is articulated in Article XV of the Tetrapolitan Confession. In it, the church is described as 'the fellowship of those who enlisted under Christ and committed themselves entirely to his faith' (Cochrane 1966, p. 72). This metaphor is military in origin, and again underlines the conviction that Christ is the only 'commander' or head of the church. The church is a community of believers; however, the hypocrites are intermingled with the true children of God. The Tetrapolitan states that faith is the true mark of the church. Although faith is invisible, the fruits of true faith are visible – especially the courageous proclamation of the Word of God.

It is also interesting that the Tetrapolitan refers explicitly to the Apostles' Creed, describing the church as a communion of saints. Furthermore, the Tetrapolitan articulates the doctrine of the church in more organic than

institutional terminology by making use of biblical metaphors such as 'the bride of Christ', 'the house of God', 'the city of God' (Augustine), 'the heavenly Jerusalem' and 'the first-born'. This is brought in relation to the work of the Holy Spirit.

In summary, it is clear that the ecclesiology articulated in the Tetrapolitan is similar to the ecclesiology of Calvin and might have influenced Calvin in his own theological development. The fundamental principles of Christ as head of the church, the preaching of the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit are quite evident.

First Helvetic Confession (1536)

Prior to the publication of the First Helvetic Confession, the Swiss cities of Basel, Berne and Zürich each drew up their own confessions (Cochrane 1966, p. 97). The preparations for a general council (eventually the Council of Trent of 1545) by the Roman pontiff made it essential to find common ground amongst the various Reformation movements. Heinrich Bullinger played an important role in the composition of the First Helvetic Confession, as well as Leo Jud, Kaspar Megander, Bucer and Capito. We know that Calvin had a close relationship with Bucer and Bullinger, with regular correspondence between them. It was also in 1536 that Calvin did extensive work on the Christian creeds, resulting in the publication of the Genevan Confession as well as the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Article 14 of the First Helvetic Confession (Cochrane 1966) states that the holy, universal church is built on the Living Rock (Jesus Christ):

> It is the fellowship and congregation of all saints which is Christ's bride and spouse which He washes with His blood and finally presents to the Father without blemish or any spot. And although this church is open and known to God's eyes alone, yet it is not only known but also gathered and built up by visible signs, rites and ordinances, which Christ Himself has instituted and appointed by the Word of God as a universal public and orderly discipline. Without these marks no one is numbered with this Church. (p. 105)

In this formulation we find the *notae ecclesiae* explicitly mentioned, namely the Word of God, the signs (sacraments) and ecclesial discipline. Furthermore, what is remarkable is the distinction between the visible and invisible church. Not only Calvin, but also the Belgic Confession gave specific attention to the marks of the church and the concept of a visible and invisible church. It is clear that Calvin, during his formative years in Geneva, took note of the confessions of the various Swiss cities.

◼ Geneva Confession (1536)

Farel had been active in Geneva since 1532. In 1536, he urged Calvin to join him. By August 1536, Calvin arrived in Geneva and immediately proceeded with the publication of four important works: Calvin's ordinances for church government, a catechism, a confession and, as mentioned, the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* were all finished by the end of 1536. In January 1537, they were considered by the Small Council of Geneva and adopted, albeit with some reservations. Heron (2014, p. 2) is of the opinion that Farel played a significant role in the 1536 Confession.

In Article 18 of the Geneva Confession, Calvin states the following:

> We believe that the proper mark by which rightly to discern the Church of Jesus Christ is that his holy gospel be purely and faithfully preached, proclaimed, heard, and kept; that his sacraments be properly administered, even if there be some imperfections and faults, as there always will be among men.

In this formulation, Calvin presents us with two marks of the church, namely the pure preaching of the gospel and right administration of the sacraments. Discipline is not mentioned as a mark of the church, although in Article 19, he continues with excommunication and church discipline.

◼ French Confession of Faith (1559)

When the persecution of French Protestants abated during 1558, the church in Paris called upon the other Reformed churches in France to convene in a synod. On 23 May 1559, 20 delegates representing 72 congregations met secretly in a private house in Paris. After four days, they adopted the French Confession of Faith, which was based on the draft that Calvin, Pierre Viret and Beza prepared earlier (Cochrane 1966, p. 138). The French synod extended the Genevan draft by splitting the first two articles into six. With these articles, which engage with the doctrine of revelation for the first time, the seeds of natural theology were sown, which continued in the Belgic Confession of 1561 and the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1643. In terms of natural theology, God not only reveals Godself through Scripture (see Calvin) but also in creation. It was only with the Barmen Declaration of 1934, under the influence of Karl Barth, that natural theology was explicitly rejected and removed from Reformed confessions.

At the 7th Synod of the French Church (1571), the French Confession of Faith was adopted as official confession of the French church, signed by Admiral Gaspard de Coligny on behalf of the French church; by Beza on behalf of the Genevan church and, interestingly enough, by Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre. It is possibly the only such document signed by a woman. Jeanne was one of the most influential leaders of the French Reformation.

It then became known as the Confession of La Rochelle or the *Confessio Gallicana* [Gallican Confession of Faith].

Article 28 of the French Confession of 1559 repeats the well-known *notae ecclesiae*, again mentioning two only: the pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. The following five articles speak to church governance, notably the equality between pastors and congregations, because there is only one true sovereign and universal bishop of the church, namely Jesus Christ.

■ Comparative analysis

When we compare the doctrine of the church as articulated in the Belgic Confession to preceding Reformed confessions, similarities and differences become clear. Similarities include aspects such as Christ as the only head of the church, the *notae ecclesiae*, the church as *creatura Verbi*, the need for proper church governance and a rejection of the Roman Catholic Church in doctrine and practice.

Differences are very much in terms of style, lucidity and logic but also in terms of length. Other confessions briefly mention the church; the Belgic Confession expounds the doctrine of the church in six rather long articles. In terms of the *notae ecclesiae*, a third mark is added explicitly, namely the exercise of discipline as punishment for sin. In this regard, discipline is not only about church governance but explicitly about punishment. This is not as Calvin or the French Confession formulated it. Even the First Helvetic Confession of 1536 articulates discipline as a mark of the church in a softer way, namely that it has to do with proper church governance. It could be argued that the Belgic Confession was responsible for the practice of censure and limited participation in Holy Communion, not only as a mechanism of keeping the sacrament 'pure' but also as a form of punishment. The perception that Reformed churches are rigid, without empathy, elitist and pre-occupied with discipline flows from this formulation in the Belgic Confession.

The inclusion of natural theology and the third mark of the church is a significant departure from Calvin's theology and earlier Reformed confessions. When Calvin engaged with the theology of Augustine, who struggled with the Donatist concept of a 'pure' church, he came to the conclusion that 'there are many sheep without and many wolves within the Church' (*Inst*. IV.1.8.). A third mark (discipline and punishment) would not fit into Calvin's ecclesiology, especially his conviction that the visible church always remains a *corpus permixtum*.

■ Articles 27–29, in relation to other articles of the Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession articulates the doctrine of the church in Articles 27, 28 and 29. However, it should be noted that the church is mentioned in several other articles of the Belgic Confession. These could be summarised as in the following sections.

■ Article 1

'We all believe with the heart […]'. Unity in faith is important. The church is unanimous in its faith in the one, eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty and perfectly wise God. The church is a community of believers, those who profess their faith in the Almighty.

■ Article 5

Article 5 makes an important statement on Holy Scripture. Scripture is not holy or canonical because the church 'decided' that it should be regarded as holy or canonical, but rather because the Holy Spirit convinces us of the fact. The Word of God is not under the control of the church; rather, the Word of God and the Holy Spirit are in control of the church.

■ Article 7

Article 7 makes an important statement that the church is governed by Holy Scripture as it 'fully contain[s] the will of God' (Cochrane 1966, p. 192). The formulation should be noted: Holy Scripture *contains* the will of God, which implies that the will of God must be discerned; it must be understood, interpreted and applied in the life of the church. The will of God is not given to the church by an oracle speaking from heaven, but through Scripture, which requires exegesis, interpretation and proclamation. This is the responsibility of the church.

■ Articles 30–36

The church is also mentioned more explicitly in terms of church governance (Articles 30–32), sacraments (Articles 33–35), as well as the relationship between church and government (Article 36). This falls outside the ambit of this contribution and will be left for discussion in other contributions.

■ Theological reflection on Articles 27–29

The English translation of Articles 27, 28 and 29, presented here, is available on the website of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) (1985). This translation also made use of the French text as approved by the Synod of Dort.

The exposition which follows the text of the Belgic Confession is by no means exhaustive. The few remarks presented here only serve to highlight the important ecclesiological elements as articulated by the Belgic Confession.

■ 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 to human eyes – as though it were snuffed out. For example, during the very dangerous time of Ahab the Lord preserved for himself seven thousand 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 people, 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. (CRCNA 1985, n.p.)

Koopmans (1949, p. 129) is of the opinion that the basis of Article 27 is to be found in the ninth article of the *Apostolicum* [*sanctam ecclesiam catholicam*], where the church is professed as holy and catholic. The concept of catholicity has its origins in Orthodox theology and is derived from the Greek words *kata* [in accordance with] and *holon* [the whole]. According to Berkhof (1962, p. 9), the Jerusalem (Greek) text of the *Apostolicum* as used by Cyril of Jerusalem dates from approximately 350 AD, and it contains the phrase 'we believe one, holy, catholic Church'. Cyril explained the term in his *Catechesis* (XVIII.23) as the 'Church that exists in every part of the world' (see Berkhof 1962, p. 11). It was worked out extensively by Augustine, especially during the Donatist controversy.

Luther did not like the word 'catholic', because it created confusion with 'Roman Catholic'. As a result, he rather translated it as 'Christian' (see Dreyer 2015). Calvin opted to speak of the 'universal church' [*ecclesia universalis*]. Calvin primarily ascribed the universality of the church to the invisible church (Berkhof 1962, p. 15). It is quite remarkable that the Belgic

Confession did not follow Calvin in this regard but rather interpreted the universality or catholicity of the church in geographical terms, as the early theologians did.

The word καθολικος as an attribute of the church is not found in the New Testament. However, the Great Commission of Christ (Mt 28) has always been understood as the expression of the universality of the church. This is further qualified by Article 27 with the phrase 'a holy congregation of true Christian believers'. The catholicity or universality of the church is linked to all people who truly believe in Christ.

In Article 27, the church is placed within a Christological context. This is closely linked to Calvin's understanding of the church as the body of Christ (Niesel 1957, p. 188). The subtext in this formulation is *contra* the Roman Catholic ecclesiology, which finds the unity of the church in the authority of the pope and the councils. Article 27 describes in an almost lyrical manner the church as a community of believers who expect their complete salvation from Christ, a community who had been washed in the blood of Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. This emphasis on the community of saints deconstructs the institutionalism of the Roman Catholic Church, presenting the church as a dynamic community of believers. A paradigm shift took place: when we speak about the church, it is not in the first place about the church but about Jesus Christ. The church is understood from a Christological–pneumatological perspective.

Article 27 then returns to the creed's formulation, with specific emphasis on the universality or catholicity of the church. Polman (n.d., p. 150) firstly describes it as a 'continuing catholicity' when Article 27 speaks of the church that exists from the beginning until the end of the world, when Christ returns. The catholicity of the church transcends the limitations of time. Secondly, Polman (n.d., p. 151) also distinguishes an 'extensive catholicity'. This points to the fact that Article 27 speaks of a church that transcends space and the limitations of nationality or geographical boundaries. Thirdly, Polman distinguishes a 'qualitative catholicity' when Article 27 speaks of church that is one in heart, living in unity under the guidance of one Spirit and one faith. Despite all the diversity in time, locality, cultures, languages and people, the catholic or universal church is one.

The subtext again is the polemic against the Roman Catholic Church, whose name is inherently contradictory or oxymoronic, because the catholic church transcends all boundaries. The catholicity and unity of the church are not dependant on ecclesial structures or the papal office but rather on the Holy Spirit and true faith based on the Word of God.

■ 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, people ought not to withdraw from it, content to be by themselves, regardless of their 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. (CRCNA 1985, n.p.)

Article 28 begins with the *adagium* of Cyprian of Carthage (martyred in 258 AD): *extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*.[174] This belief, that there is no salvation outside the church, was repeatedly used by many popes to confirm the exclusive salvific role of the Roman Catholic Church. The question is, why would Luther (see Jankiewicz 2017), Calvin (*Inst*. IV.1.1) and De Brès (in the Belgic Confession) propagate this belief?

The use of this *adagium* by early theologians like Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine flowed from the interface between soteriology and ecclesiology. Seen from this perspective, it is not about a specific church or denomination, nor about the church in some institutional configuration. The church that is essential for salvation is the universal church, the church of Christ.

Both Luther and Calvin were influenced by Augustine's understanding of the need for a visible church, which would mediate the believers' access to the Word of God and the sacraments while regulating and guiding the moral and spiritual welfare of the believers (Jankiewicz 2017, p. 94). Despite this, both Reformers were quite aware of the danger of a soteriological–ecclesiological fusion, which they found in the Roman Catholic ecclesiology. That is why the *sola gratia* principle became so important. It undermined

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174. 'The first signs of this fusion [between soteriology and ecclesiology] surfaced at the beginning of the second century in the writings of Ignatius and later in Irenaeus and Tertullian. In the third century Cyprian gave it its mature expression when he boldly proclaimed "*quia salus extra ecclesiam non est*" (Cyprian Letter 72.21) or "outside the church there is no salvation", a catchphrase later reiterated by popes and affirmed by church councils [...] This belief found its most formalized expression in the articles of the Council of Florence in 1442 where the gathered bishops agreed that the "[holy Roman Church] [...] firmly believes, professes and preaches that no one outside the Catholic Church, neither pagans nor Jews nor heretics nor schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels [...]"' (Jankiewicz 2017, p. 78).

the excessive emphasis on the Roman Catholic Church as an instrument of grace, Roman Catholic sacramental theology and the doctrine of *gratia infusa* (i.e. the transference of grace through the ministering of the seven sacraments by an ordained priest). The fundamental difference between Roman Catholic and Reformed interpretations of the *extra ecclesiam* is to be found in ecclesiology. In Roman Catholic ecclesiology, it is all about the church as an institution, while in Reformed ecclesiology it is all about the community of saints, the church as a dynamic community of believers whose only head is Jesus Christ, guided by the Word and Spirit.

Over and against this sacramentalism, Calvin made it clear that the church only proclaims the gospel and preaches that salvation is possible through grace in Jesus Christ (Dreyer 2010, p. 170). Calvin (*Inst.* IV.1.5) understood that people need an external medium to cultivate and maintain their faith in God. This external medium is the church. Through the proclamation of the Word, the sacraments and pastoral care, people are nourished and strengthened in their faith. God chose the church for this service. People should respect the church as an instrument in God's hand and should become members of the true church. It is this understanding of the *adagium* of *extra ecclesiam nula salus est* that we find in Article 28.

From the above, it becomes clear that being a member of the church stands above question. Being a Christian in isolation, removed from the community of saints, is an impossibility. It is the very nature of the church that it is a community. In John 17, Christ prays for the unity of the church, and Paul (Rm 12 and 1 Cor 12) used the metaphor of a body to explain the importance of every single believer as part of the body of Christ. Article 28 clearly refers to these texts when it states (CRCNA 1985):

> 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, by serving to build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body. (n.p.)

Indirectly, it also requires a decision to leave a false church behind and join the true church. This is understandable in light of the 16th-century Reformation and the situation within the Roman Catholic Church, but it also sowed the seeds of a never-ending process of schisms within the Reformed tradition. It is a cruel irony that those who are so convinced of the truth and immutability of the Reformed confessions are often the first to cite Article 28 to establish a new, true church, but in the process they forget that the real intention of Article 28 is not to promote 'loveless individualism' (Polman n.d., p. 164) or schisms in the name of 'truth' but to actually maintain the unity of the church. This is very clear from the last sentence of the article: 'And so, all who withdraw from the Church or do not join it act contrary to God's ordinance'.

A last aspect of Article 28 which should be noted is the priesthood of all believers. Every member of the church has the responsibility to 'build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body'. In Reformed ecclesiology, there is no such thing as a 'lay member' of the church. All members of the church were emancipated by Christ, not only from the bonds of sin and death but also from fear for punishment and control by church officials. Every Christian is free (Luther) – not free to live a reckless or indulgent life, but rather a life of service in God's kingdom. We are free to serve God. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 12), every believer had been anointed by the Holy Spirit to serve as priest, prophet and king. Dreyer (2020) summarised it as follows:

> The priesthood of believers could be regarded as one of the central principles of the 16th-century Reformation. The doctrine asserts that all believers have equal access to God through Christ, the only high priest, and thus do not need any other priestly mediator. The implication of this doctrine is that all Christians are equal before God. Ordained clergy differ from non-ordained believers only in terms of function [*ministerium*] and not in terms of status [*officium*] [...] The priesthood of believers is mentioned by Calvin [*e.g. Inst. II.7.1*] as an extension of Christ's priesthood. Calvin also mentions the priesthood of believers when he speaks about Peter and the keys of the kingdom [*Inst. III.4.14 and again in IV.7.4 as well as IV.19.28*]. It is remarkable that Calvin does not discuss the priesthood of the believers in detail, never connects it to any ecclesial office (including the elders and deacons) and places it within the everyday life of the Christian. (p. 3)

◼ 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 can belong to 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 Saviour, Jesus Christ. They love the true God and their neighbours, 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 humans, 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 distinguishfrom each other. (CRCNA 1985, n.p.)

Article 29 of the Belgic Confession makes a clear distinction between true and false. The true church is easily recognised, as well as false churches that pretend to be the church of Christ. The true church (1) engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; (2) the sacraments are administered as Christ instituted them; and (3) it practises church discipline for correcting faults. Wherever and whenever these three *notae ecclesiae* are present, we find the true church. In a false 'church', there is no evidence of truthful proclamation of the gospel.

The third mark of the true church, namely discipline, did not come from Calvin. The origin of the third mark is to be found in the theologies of Bucer, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Beza and others. Some would argue that the Anabaptists, who maintained the ideal of a pure church as well as strict discipline, influenced De Brès to include the third mark. Even though the third mark did not surface in the ecclesiology of major Reformed theologians such as Luther and Calvin, it was a widespread and accepted principle amongst many other leaders of the Reformation. It makes little sense to argue whether the third mark should be there or not. The fact is, Article 29 of the Belgic Confession entrenched three *notae ecclesiae* in Reformed ecclesiology.

Closely related to the question of the third mark of the true church, Article 29 describes the characteristics of true believers. They are known for their faith in Jesus Christ as their only Saviour; their love for God and their neighbours; and a life that speaks of obedience to God under guidance of the Holy Spirit.

■ Conclusion: Relevance of Reformed ecclesiology

In conclusion, some general remarks on the relevance of Reformed ecclesiology as articulated in Articles 27, 28 and 29 of the Belgic Confession are necessary. Reformed ecclesial practice, for many centuries, was determined by the ecclesiology of Calvin, transferred to following generations by the Belgic Confession. The centrality of preaching in the

Sunday liturgy, the sacraments, the role of the elder in church governance as well as discipline are evident to this day. This translates to a very specific type of theological education, ministry, church governance (through offices and assemblies under the guidance of Word and Spirit), ecclesial practices, worship and church discipline, especially in terms of celebrating Holy Communion. The Reformed *notae ecclesiae* resulted in an ecclesial practice which seems to be introverted, pastorally oriented and focused on the maintenance of the church. Dreyer (2013) describes an introverted pastoral ministry as follows:

> Pastoral ministry has a strong focus on church members attending the Sunday service. A 'good' church member is one who regularly attends the Sunday service. Over centuries Sunday service became the undisputed focal point of ministry. The world must come to church on Sunday – but does the church go to the world on weekdays? Ministry is the responsibility of the minister, elder and deacon [...] Ordinary church members have a very limited role in congregational ministry. There is a clear distinction between the responsibilities of ordinary church members and those holding office in the church, although Luther and Calvin emphasised the importance of the priesthood of all believers. However, with time, the overemphasis on the offices and continued institutionalisation of the church minimalised the role of church members [...] Pastoral ministry is to a large extent dependant on the efficacy of the pastor loci [...] Pastoral ministry is focused inward, giving high priority to pastoral care and the maintenance of congregational structures [...] Pastoral ministry has an inherent weakness in terms of missional ministry. Missional ministry, as research has shown, receives very little attention in traditional reformed congregations [...]. (p. 4)

Reformed ecclesiology is still based on a 16th-century reality, of people who were required by law to be members of the church, baptise their children and attend Sunday worship. It reflects a situation of power, where the ministers and elders were respected as custodians of God's kingdom. However, 21st-century church members are often absent from Sunday worship and do not celebrate Holy Communion on a regular basis, but they are very rarely disciplined.

The challenge facing Reformed churches at the beginning of the 21st century is to facilitate a reformation or transformation of the system story. The system dynamics[175] of the Genevan church and the Reformed churches of the 16th century became outdated at the beginning of the 21st century. If the church is understood as a complex system of relationships, emotions, ideas and structures (as it should), it is quite clear that we are faced with fundamental systemic challenges. The system story of the 16th century is fundamentally different to the system story of a postmodern 21st century.

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175. 'System dynamics' is a theory designed to understand the nonlinear behaviour of complex systems over time.

From this flows the logical conclusion that if the Belgic Confession is to retain some sort of relevance, it has to be reinterpreted and used in a way that would make sense within contemporary contexts. The challenge will be to translate Reformed ecclesiology into the language of a missional ecclesiology, to transform the third mark of the church (discipline) into discipleship by the proper understanding of the priesthood of all believers.

In my view (see Dreyer 2016: 166), Reformed ecclesiology will remain relevant if it is re-articulated in terms of the *missio Dei* and missional ecclesiology. Missional ecclesiology demands more of the church than deciding which community service projects to undertake or setting congregational priorities for the coming year. Missional ecclesiology is a way of understanding the church. It begins with the *missio Dei* – God's own 'self-sending' in Christ by the Spirit to redeem and transform creation. In a missional ecclesiology, the church is not a building or an institution but a community of witness, called into being and equipped by God and sent into the world to testify to and participate in Christ's work. The church does not have missions; instead, the mission of God creates the church. The church serves God's call to mission through its work in three broadly defined categories: the proclamation of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the nurture of the covenant community of disciples. It undertakes this mission without regard for its own agenda or survival (Dreyer 2016, pp. 166–167).

In this formulation, the traditional *notae ecclesiae* are re-articulated in terms of a missional ecclesiology. What Reformed churches need is to rethink, refocus, re-articulate, recreate and re-invent themselves in terms of Reformed ecclesiology, as well as in terms of current contexts and the challenges of our time.

The challenge is to be church; to become what the church already is. The challenge facing Reformed churches is, in the words of Karl Barth, to continue the reformation of the church.

Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda!

To keep God's holy order: The relevance of Reformed governance in Articles 30–32 of the Belgic Confession for churches today

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■ Introduction

Bernard C Lategan (2008, p. 450) considers the confessions as a kind of hermeneutics of the Bible (cf. Coetzee 2016, p. 2). In a similar way, the Reformed church order can be considered as a kind of hermeneutics of both the Bible and the confessions, as it aims to be a biblical and confessional order. This contribution focuses on Articles 30–32 of the Belgic Confession. These articles are based on the Bible and elaborated on in Reformed church order. They deal with church governance, the theology of the offices, collegial leadership and excommunication.

The Belgic Confession of 1561 does not stand alone. It needs to be put in a confessional period in which other confessions saw the light, for example, the French Confession of 1559, the Scottish Confession of 1560, the Belgic Confession of 1561 and the Anglican Confession – the Thirty-Nine Articles – of 1571. Such and other confessional developments are understandable against the backdrop of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation, wherein the Reformed churches tried to navigate, as *via media*, between the Roman Catholic and the Anabaptist churches. The Belgic Confession was not easily adopted in the Reformed church in the Netherlands. Frank van der Pol (2012) stated:

> *Kerkelijke vergaderingen hebben tegen het eind van de zestiende eeuw weliswaar een krachtig, algemeen geldig confessioneel concept voor de publieke Gereformeerde kerk en haar ambtsdragers geformuleerd, maar iedere stad en regio heeft toch haar eigen reformatiegeschiedenis. Daarom is generaliserend spreken over de impact van de NGB* [*Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*] *op de reformatie in de noordelijke Nederlanden problematisch.* (p. 82)

Nevertheless, it became part of the confessional foundation of this church. Articles 30–32 of the Belgic Confession form the second part of the group of Articles 27–32. These articles are on the nature of the church. Articles 30–32 are an elaboration on this nature when it comes to (1) the Reformed type of church governance (Art. 30); (2) the Reformed theology of the office, and the offices of minister, elder and deacon (Art. 31); and (3) the Reformed order and discipline of the church (Art. 32).

The leading question is: What is the relevance of Articles 30, 31 and 32 of the Belgic Confession of 1561 for Reformed churches today? To understand their relevance for today, we need to understand the historical and theological context of this confession. Successively, each of the upcoming sections deals with one of these three articles. This will be followed by a section on current developments that can be considered deviations, a chafing with, an elaboration or a variety of Articles 30, 31 and 32 of the Belgic Confession. The concluding section aims to provide an answer to the research question.

■ Article 30

This section deals with Article 30 of the Belgic Confession. For this contribution I made use of the 16th-century French text (Busch 2009, p. 338).

■ The church

In Reformed ecclesiology, the church is *creatura Verbi*, a creature of the Word (cf. Schwöbel 1989, pp. 110–155). It implies that Reformed church polity is about peace and order in an applicable manner, because its

fundament is the church as *creatura Verbi*. This is in line with what John Calvin (1509–1564) included in his *Institutes* (IV.1.1–4) (Calvin 1949, pp. 5–10).

◼ No law book

Article 30 of the Belgic Confession holds that the church should be governed 'according to the spiritual order'. Such a spiritual order does not mean a law book or a set of legal regulations. Every Reformed church order also contains such regulations. This is important for legal clarification and legal protection of and within the church, the general assemblies or judicatories, the congregants and the office-bearers, but it is also important for third parties. Nevertheless, a Reformed church order ought to be a spiritual order, as CJ Smit (1946–2011) stated in Afrikaans: '*Die kerkorde het nooit die pretensie gehad van 'n volledige kerklike wetboek wat vir alle moontlike voorkomende situasies en probleme antwoorde moet gee nie*' (Smit 1984, p. 119; cf. Pont 1981, p. 147). '*Slegs die rigtinggewende beginsels is daarin neergelê*' (Smit 1984, p. 119). Moreover, he (Smit 1984, p. 119) states: '*Hierdie hooflyne loop as 'n formulering van die toepaslike Skrifbeginsels dwarsdeur die historiese ontplooiing van die kerkorde, hoewel dit nie aanvanklik op die wyse gesistematiseer is nie*'. He agrees with Pont (1981, pp. 146–147): '*In plaas dus van 'n volledig uitgewerkte kerklike wetboek wat vir alle moontlike voorkomende situasies en probleme antwoorde gee, word hier slegs die rigtinggewende beginsels neergelê*'. Ideally, such an order is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ in his Word. Or, as Pieter Coertzen (1998) states:

> The uniqueness of the order/law in the church consists, on the one hand, in the fact that the church as such is the creation of the Tripartite God but, on the other hand, in the fact that God Himself gave the law/order for His church in His Word. It is in the Word that the church hears of God's acts of law and justice, of His law and His specific prescriptions for His church. (pp. 47–48)

Article 25 of the French Confession reads: '[…] *nous croyons que l'ordre de l'Eglise qui a esté establie en son authorité doit estre sacré et inviolable* [We believe that the order of the church which has been established in his authority must be sacred and inviolable]' (Campi 2009, p. 24). It connects with Article 30 of the Belgic Confession when it comes to being a spiritual, sacred church order which should be inviolable. Still, the question arises: why not a nonspiritual or nonsacred church order, a more pragmatic set of rules, if not a law book? Coertzen (1998) states:

> The answer is actually very simple: because the church is a unique creation of God, it has a unique order/law. To put this in another way, one could also say that there is a specific order in and for the church as the church is a community created by God. The church is a community that God wishes to sustain in a particular way. This also means that church law, as a non-constitutional law, is a unique kind of jurisprudence that must research, explain and apply God's law for His church on the basis of the principles laid down in the Word of God […]. (p. 29)

A Reformed church order is not *a priori* sacred or spiritual. Church orders can be – or in some cases are – more products of church politics and church polity than they are led by the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. Coertzen (1998) seems to agree, as he states that:

> [*A*] church order is not holy per definition; it is holy only in as far as it helps to pave the way, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for the church to live a holy life before God. [...] While continually seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit those responsible for writing a church order must also carefully listen to the voice of the people in order to find the most adequate structure for the life of the church [...]. (pp. 32–33)

Leen Van Drimmelen (2007, p. 7) pays attention to the aim of the church, which is the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the prayer of the world for the coming of the kingdom of God. This implies for Van Drimmelen (2007) that this is the criterion to judge the quality of a church order:

> *Want de kerk verliest haar betekenis, als zij niet meer dienstbaar is aan de komst van het Koninkrijk van God.* [...] *Een goede kerkorde put uit de Bijbel als bron en geeft uitzicht op de daarin beloofde toekomst.* [...] *in heel de Bijbel lezen we* [...] *telkens waar het volk van God toe geroepen is: het heil van het komende Koninkrijk van God verkondigen, dat heil vieren en dat heil zo definiëren, zo de contouren daarvan schetsen, dat geweerd wordt wat het getuigenis van de kerk weerspreekt. Een goede kerkorde schetst de contouren van een kerk waarin het Woord van God het voor het zeggen heeft. De organisatie (de orde) van de kerk moet zorgen dat dat ook gebeurt. In die zin is een goede kerkorde een troon waarop de Woordkoning zetelt.* (pp. 7–8)

Van Drimmelen's statement implies that a church order cannot be just a law book or that a law book cannot be called 'church order', as it contradicts the nature of the church. In that case, it is just a law book or set of regulations, maybe a good one, but still no *church* order, although it aims to regulate the life and the work of the church. A Reformed church order is theological in nature and juridical in format, although it might contain theological sentences or phrases which are translated into juridical sentences or phrases. And not to be overlooked, a Reformed church order, as an expression and codification of Reformed ecclesiology, is about the *potestas ecclesiastica interna* [the internal affairs of the church] and not about the *postestas ecclesiastica externa* [the external affairs of the church]. It is a *church* order, an order for and of the *church*, not an order to regulate society and politics. Moreover, in Articles 30–32, the Belgic Confession is silent about the relationship between the church and the secular authorities.

■ The council of the church

Article 30 of the Belgic Confession expresses that there should be ministers, '*Surueillans*' [elders] and deacons in every Reformed church. It takes the

stance that the church is governed by ministers, elders and deacons. It is expected that office-bearers will be elected as persons of faith and are chosen according to the rule that Paul gave to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3. It should not be allowed for individuals to intrude into the church to govern Christ's church. This is a key notion in the theology of the office and its application in Reformed churches, not only in the Belgic Confession but also in Article 31 of the French Confession: '*Nul ne se doit ingérer de son authorité propre pour gouverner l'Eglise* [No one should interfere with his own authority to govern the Church]' (Campi 2009, p. 26). Calvin (1949, pp. 64–71) included the notion of election also in his *Institutes* (IV.3.10–16). This is not just a technical or administrative rule but a matter of Reformed belief (cf. Janssen 2016, pp. 105–106). Election of elders and deacons also implies that they should not hold that office for life.

The council preserves the true religion and doctrine and ensures that 'evil people are corrected spiritually and held in check' (Art. 30 of the Belgic Confession). This is connected to Article 29 of the French Confession (Campi 2009, p. 26).

Its aim is not only to focus on safeguarding the purity of the true Reformed teaching but also to help and comfort the poor and all the afflicted according to their need (Art. 30 of the Belgic Confession; Art. 29 of the French Confession). All things in the church need to be done decently and in good order, as in 1 Corinthians 14:40 (cf. Coertzen 1998, p. 24; Van den Broeke 2020b, p. 3).

The minister is expected 'to preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments' (Art. 30 of the Belgic Confession). Together with the elders and the deacons, the ministers make up the council of the church. However, this conflicts with the governance in some Reformed churches, where deacons are excluded from the consistory. For example, Article 36 of the church order of 1978 of the *Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt* [Reformed Churches liberated] stated that the consistory consisted only of the minister(s) and the elders, not the deacons (Kerkrecht.nl 2022):

> *In alle kerken zal een kerkeraad zijn, die bestaat uit de predikant(en) en de ouderlingen. Hij zal regelmatig bijeenkomen onder voorzitterschap van de predikant of van de predikanten bij toerbeurt. De kerkeraad zal eveneens regelmatig met de diakenen vergaderen* [...]. (n.p.)

Andries DR Polman (1897–1993) stated that it was more a paradox which Reformed theologians in the 20th century experienced than one faced by the Reformed fathers of the 16th century (Polman 1953, p. 24; cf. Kamphuis 1973, p. 113). Polman, of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, disagreed with Piet Deddens (1891–1958) of the Reformed Church Liberated. Deddens was of the opinion that deacons did not belong to the consistory. He (cf. 1947, p. 20) suggested to exclude the deacons from the church

governance and the consistory. Moreover, he considered that it would be more appropriate and more biblical if the deacons could focus on their ministry of mercy. See, for example, for this 'ministry of mercy' the Book of Church Order of the Reformed Church in America (2022, pp. 13, 22, 183), whereas the elders have 'a ministry of watchful and responsible care for all matters relating to the welfare and good order of the church' (Reformed Church in America 2022, p. 13). Deddens seconded Gisbert Voetius (1589–1676), Frederik L Rutgers (1836–1917), Herman H Kuyper (1864–1945) and Harm Bouwman (1863–1933) (cf. Bouwman 1934, pp. 113–116; Kuyper 1883, p. 66; Rutgers 1921, pp. 275–277; Voetius 1676, vol. IV, p. 62). However, Deddens did not want the deacons to end up in an isolated position. Article 36 of the church order of 1978 (Kerkrecht.nl 1978) ruled that the consistory will meet the deacons on a regular basis.

On its way to the final church order of 1978, the committee of the general synod considered this paradox between the Belgic Confession and the church order. Deddens concluded that the confession had to follow the church order and that the confession had to be revised. His successor, Jaap Kamphuis (1921–2011), supported the opinion of Polman (1953, p. 24; Kamphuis 1973, pp. 113–137). Polman (1953) concluded:

> *Voor de principiele tegenstelling, door Deddens gesteld, noch voor de ver doorgevoerde eenheid der ambten, gelijk zij vooral door Dijk […] ontwikkeld wordt, kan men zich op de Reformatie beroepen. Nergens wordt geleerd, dat de diaken krachtens de eenheid der ambten in alle kerkelijke zaken betrokken moet worden. Evenmin wordt de gedachte voorgestaan, dat de ambten streng gescheiden moeten blijven. Onderlinge assistentie van leer- en regeerouderlingen (Calvijn) of van alle drie ambten in de kerkeraad (Frankr[ijk]) is 't enige verschil, dat wordt opgemerkt. 't Laatste wordt én in onze Confessie én in de Dordtse kerkorde voorgestaan.* (p. 29)

In this quote, Polman referred to Klaas Dijk (1885–1968). In his book, Polman (1952, pp. 244–261) referred also to Jan Hovius (1900–1979) and Doede Nauta (1898–1994). They tried to argue the correctness of the Belgic Confession on the basis of the unity of the office. They argued that the church order should be revised to be in accordance with the confession. Dijk (1952) took the stance that:

> *[D]e verklaring van de tegenstelling tussen Confessie en K.O. ligt veeleer hierin, dat enerzijds onze K.O. is opgesteld naar de K.O. van Genève en deze aan de diakenen geen plaats gaf in de kerkeraad, en anderzijds dat in de kerken der Reformatie de dienst der barmhartigheid niet zuiver werd gehandhaafd; het werd een verbinding van burgerlijke en kerkelijke armenzorg; het diaconaat werd teveel overheidsinstantie, en aan zulk een college kon men geen plaats geven in de raad van Christus' Kerk.* (pp. 246–247)

He concluded that there was no reason to change the confession. Moreover, the church order needed to be brought in accordance with what the French and Dutch churches had stated about ecclesiastical governance. If this

were applied, the offices would, to a certain extent, be distinguished but not separated (cf. Dijk 1952, p. 247). So, Dijk did not agree with Deddens's suggestion to change the confession. The same applied to Hovius (1951) of the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*:

> *De meening van prof. P. Deddens dat de Belijdenis zich in deze kwestie moet conformeeren aan de Kerkorde, deelen wij niet. Of dan, omgekeerd, een wijziging van de kerkorde op dit punt gerechtvaardigd, en dus gewenscht, ja zelfs noodzakelijk is? Naar mijn bescheiden meening: ongetwijfeld'*. (pp. 26–27)

Nauta (1952, p. 1) mentioned '*een zekere discrepantie*' between the Belgic Confession and the church order, but he also pointed out the fact that the church order also created space for small consistories to include the deacons in the governance of the church. Moreover, he pointed out that on several occasions the consistory could only discern and take decisions together with the deacons. So already in the beginning of his article, Nauta (1952, p. 1) concluded: '*Dientengevolge is hier feitelijk van een scherpe tegenstelling geen sprake*'. Nauta (1952, p. 10) concluded that a consistory consists or should consist of the pastor, the elders and the deacons. This also became codified in the revised church order of 1957 of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands to which Dijk, Nauta and Polman belonged. Article 35 of this church order codified what was more or less the ecclesial practice, namely that there was a distinction between the broad consistory (pastor, elders and deacons) and the small consistory (pastor and elders). Nauta (1971, p. 156) took the stance that the rule and application in his denomination should not be considered the sole possibility or the most plausible solution which needed to be defended. He (1971, p. 156) did consider that this revised church order was closer to the Belgic Confession and was the preferred choice. Polman took up a middle position between Deddens on the one hand and Dijk, Hovius and Nauta on the other. Smit (1984, p. 69) seemed to second Polman as he considered: '*Die belydenis gaan* prinsipieel *uit van die eenheid van die dienste, terwyl die kerkorde* funksioneel *uitgaan van die differensiëring van die dienste*'.

Superintendans

The Belgic Confession does not include the *superintendans*, whereas Article 32 of the French Confession does so (Campi 2009, p. 26). A *superintendans* was considered to conflict with the anti-hierarchic ecclesiology and church. That becomes clear from, among others, the golden rule of the Acts of the Synod of Emden, Article 1:

> *Gheen kercke, gheen dyener des worts, gheen ouderlingh noch dyacken en sal heerschappie d'een over d'ander voeren, maer sal sych veel meer hyer yn voor alle quaedt vermoeyen ende anlockynghe, om te herschappen, wachten*. (ed. Goeters 1971, p. 14)

The fear of hierarchy was prominent. Eddy van der Borght (2007, pp. 107, 124, 126, 131, 140, 206, 212, 226, 229, 273, 291–292, 400, 413, 418, 432) sees that this fear of hierarchy, sacerdotalisation, clericalisation, abuse of power, clerical domination, clericalism and sacerdotal priesthood is deeply rooted in the Reformed minds. Article 1 of the Acts of the Synod of Emden is understandable in the 16th-century context of taking position against the 16th-century Roman Catholic Church. It should not be overlooked that these Acts concluded with another golden (nonindependent) rule (Art. 53) against the Anabaptists:

> *Dese artyckelen, die wettelicke ende rechte ordeninghe der kercken aengaende, sijn also ghestelt met ghemeyn accordt, dat se, soo de nut der kercke anders eyschte, verandert, vermeerdert ende vermindert moghen ende behooren te werden. Ten sal nochtans gheener bysonderer ghemeynte toestaen, sulcks te doen, maer alle kercken sullen neersticheit doen, dat se die onderhouden, tot datter anders van der synodale versamelinghe in besloten woordt.* (ed. Goeters 1971, p. 54)

The order of the church cannot be changed, multiplied or reduced unless with general consent ['*met ghemeyn accoordt*']. The Reformed church tried to navigate between the Roman Catholic ecclesiology and canon law on the one hand and the Anabaptist ecclesiology and its organisation of the church on the other. However, in the Reformed ecclesiology, there were and are elements of hierarchy, whether Reformed churches like it or not. There is a kind of inequality, not only between the minister, the elder and the deacon, but also in the ecclesial practice. Hierarchy, dominion, clericalisation, sacerdotal priesthood and abuse of power occur. It happens that officers abuse their authority. A kind of hierarchy is present in the function of the moderator of, in general, pastors of ecclesial meetings: the consistory, the classis, the particular synod and the general or national synods (cf. Van den Broeke 2011). There is nothing wrong with *authority*; that is something other than acting *authoritarian*.

■ Article 31: The officers of the Church

This section focuses on Article 31 of the Belgic Confession, which deals with the officers of the church (Busch 2009, pp. 338–339).

■ Stewardship, no lordship

In the context of Articles 27–32 of the Belgic Confession, the theology of the offices is rooted in the ecclesial fundament of Jesus Christ as the eternal King (Art. 27), the only Head of his church (Art. 29 and Art. 31), the only universal Bishop (Art. 31) and the only Master (Art. 32). This should make officers aware of the *Christocratic* nature of Reformed church governance. They should serve Christ and his church as servants, not as lords. As elected

office-bearers, they do not receive *magisterium,* as in the Roman Catholic Church, but *ministerium*. They cannot act *suo jure*, as they have limited power. The system of checks and balances of the Reformed type of church governance and collegial leadership limits the ecclesiastical power and authority of officers (Van den Broeke 2020a, p. 152). Allan J Janssen (1948–2020) stated: 'The governance of the congregation is by council, not by person [...] The confession claims that governance by "God's Word" is in the assembly of the offices, of three offices together' (Janssen 2016, p. 105). This does not prevent all kind of abuse in the church.

■ Office-bearers

That the church does not (only) belong to people but is Christ's property and domain becomes clear from Article 31 of the Belgic Confession. A Reformed church is expected to have officers who govern the church. Among ministers, there should be equality and no difference in power and authority ('*ils ont vne mesme puissance et authorité*', Busch 2009, pp. 338–339) – they have the same power and authority. All the ministers are servants of Christ. He is the Universal Bishop and the only head of the church. Article 31 of the Belgic Confession does not mention anything about this application of equal power and authority to the offices of elder and deacon. This is in accordance with Article 30 of the French Confession ('*mesme autorité et esgale puissance*', Campi 2009 , p. 26) – same authority and equal power.

In addition to the discussion included in the previous section of whether deacons belong to the consistory or not, Article 31 raises another paradox. On the one hand, it makes clear that the consistory consists of the minister, the elders and the deacons. On the other hand, it excludes the deacons from the special esteem for ministers and elders. Everyone in the church is called to live in peace with the minister and elders 'without grumbling, quarreling, or fighting'. It does not mention the deacons.

■ Article 32

This next section is about Article 32 of the Belgic Confession (Busch 2009, p. 339).

■ In obedience to God

Article 32 assigns 'those who govern the church' to 'establish and set up "a certain order"'. Its aim is to maintain the body of the church. This is not just because it is a rule but because, as De Brès stated, 'We also believe that it is useful and good' (Art. 32 of the Belgic Confession). When Calvin entered

Geneva, he did not find a well-organised church – far from that (cf. Baum 1879, pp. 891–892; ed. Bonnet 1854):

> *Quand ie vins premierement en ceste Eglise, il n'y avoit quasi comme rien. On preschoit et puis c'est tout. On cerchoit bien les idoles et les brusloit-on; mais il n'y avoit aucune réformation.*
> [When I first came to this Church, there was almost nothing there. We preached and then that was it. The idols were sought and burned. We were looking for idols well and burned them; but there was no reformation.] (p. 574)

To him, it was important that the church was '*bien ordonneé*' – well-organised (Opitz 2006, p. 246): '*Pourtant si nous voulons avoir l'Esglise bien ordonneé et l'entretenir en son entire, il nous fault observer ceste forme de regime* [However, if we wish to have the Church well ordered and maintain it in its entirety, we must observe this form of regime]'. It was not just a matter or organisation or regulation, but of belief. There should be no space for church polity Docetism (Van den Broeke 2019, pp. 97–101). Hans Dombois considered this *Rechtsfremdheit* of theologians, who are sometimes too proud of their lack of knowledge or ignorance of church polity, as *skandalon* (Dombois 1967–1968, p. 368). The Holy Spirit manifests himself in not only a spiritual but also a material way. The spiritual manifestation does not exclude the material expression. Reformed church polity helps to keep the church sound. It is a guideline for those who govern the church to stand up against whatever is 'deviating from what Christ, our only Master, has ordained for us' (Art. 32 of the Belgic Confession). This means that it is not about the rejection of some human innovations or imposed laws which affect the worship of God as such but about all such innovations and laws 'which bind and force our consciences in any way' (Art. 32 of the Belgic Confession) (cf. Janssen 2016, p. 106). This is related to Article 33 of the French Confession (Campi 2009, pp. 26–27). This means that excommunication can be '*necessaire avec toutes ses appartenances*' (Campi 2009, pp. 26–27). Article 32 of the Belgic Confession calls to 'accept only what is proper to maintain harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God'. To safeguard the Reformed *ecclesia purior*, a pure church, it is necessary to include the notion of excommunication. This is mandatory, according to the Word of God.

◼ Human and divine

The Lord's Day 31, Question and Answer (QA) 85, of the Heidelberg Catechism[176] relates to Article 32 of the Belgic Confession, as well as with Article 33 of the French Confession, which also excludes human inventions and all laws which do not help to serve God (Campi 2009, pp. 26–27).

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176. 'How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline' (Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary 2022b).

This article also makes clear that human inventions and all laws which bind the consciences of the believers should be excluded and, moreover, that the application of excommunication is necessary. This is in accordance with Article 32 of the Belgic Confession.

Voetius made a distinction between the *ius divinum positivum* and the *ius divinum permissivum* (Voetius 1669 III, pp. 835–836; IV, pp. 129–132). This becomes clear from Article 32 of the Belgic Confession. *Ius divinum positivum* is about God's assignment to the church. It is eternal, unchangeable, godly law. *Ius divinum permissivum* is about ecclesial or human regulations about obedience to God and the unity of the church which needs to be kept and promoted. Such regulations are about the *adiaphora*, indifferent topics in the church. They are changeable and flexible (cf. Bouwman 1937, pp. 115–118; Du Plooy 1987, p. 12; Smit 1984, pp. 67–68; Strauss 2018, p. 3; Van den Broeke 2020a, pp. 156–157).

The church does not only depend on human conditions and deployment. This is related to the Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. Question 54, which is connected to this Lord's Day 21: 'What do you believe concerning the holy catholic Christian church?' (Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary 2022a; '*Was glaubstu von der heiligen algemeinen Christlichen Kirchen?*', Neuser 2009, p. 188). In the answer, it is expressed that the Son of God has chosen a church with an eschatological focus, a church chosen to everlasting life ['*ein außerwelte gemein zum eiwgen leben*'] (Neuser 2009, p. 188), but this church also dates from the beginning of the world ['*von anbegin der welt*']. It is Christ who 'gathers, defends and preserves for himself' (Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary 2022a; '*versamle, schütze und erhalte*', Neuser 2009, p. 188) this church by his Spirit and Word in the unity of the true faith ['*durch sein Geist und wort in einigkeit des waren glaubens*'] (Neuser 2009, p. 188).

Firstly, this functions as a mirror for all Reformed office-bearers and congregants. It is not *their* church but *his* church. This puts all human efforts in the church into perspective. Human efforts are valuable in themselves, necessary and important, but worthless and in vain if they are not related to Christ's ownership of the church.

Secondly, this does not mean that people are excluded from participation. On the contrary, the answer to Question 54 continues: 'And I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of it' (Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary 2022a; '*und daß ich derselben ein lebendiges glied bin, und ewig bleiben werde*', Neuser 2009, p. 188). This answer to Question 54 includes both the individual and the collective: 'I believe [...] that the Son of God [...]' gathers, defends, and preserves for himself a church 'out of the whole human race' (Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary 2022a; '*auß dem gantzen menschlichen geschlecht*', Neuser 2009, p. 188).

Although the Reformed church aims to be a sound church, at the same time it is not for the happy few, but it includes people 'out of the whole human race'. It is well-written and something to believe in and to confess, but at the same time, the ecclesial practice of exclusion and lack of diversity contradicts it. Later, I will come back to this paradox.

■ Church today

In this section, I try to pay attention to what can be considered as a departure from Articles 30, 31 and 32 of the Belgic Confession, or new developments which can be considered as a variety. I observe several developments which I can only address briefly: (1) a supralocal office-bearer; (2) the decline of the offices; (3) in some churches, no elections take place anymore; (4) the *charismata*; (5) the discomfort with the application of discipline and/or excommunication; (6) the decline or at least the underestimation of the church order; (7) conflict and catholicity; (8) diaconate and society.

■ A supralocal office-bearer?

The Belgic Confession is stricter than the French Confession when it comes to a supralocal office-bearer. The French Confession includes the *superintendans*; the Belgic Confession does not. Again, this needs to be put in the context of fear regarding hierarchy and abuse of power and authority. However, the ecclesial practice, also because of different political or societal contexts, demonstrates variety with a view to the organisation of the church in several countries. For example, the *Magyarországi Református Egyház*, the Hungarian Reformed Church, has bishops. Since 2018, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (a merger of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands) has the so-called classis-pastor [*classispredikant*]. The classis-pastor has some, but limited, power (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland 2022a). The classis-pastor is not a bishop, maybe 'half a bishop' (De Jong 2020, pp. 55–71). Ordinance 4-16-1 states: 'The classis-pastor gives shape to the responsibility of the classis assembly for the supervision of congregations and office-bearers' (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland 2022). In cases of urgency, the classis-pastor can immediately take a provisional decision, and soon afterwards, the classis-pastor submits this to the *breed moderamen*, the extended moderamen of the classis meeting, which must ratify or adopt a new decision within two months.

Such developments can be considered as contrary to presbyterial-synodal system of church governance. However, with a view to Hungary, but also to the Presbyterian Church, the authority, the composition and the

function of general assemblies or judicatories, Van't Spijker (1990, p. 338) considered space for variety. He stated that churches belonging to this system move with '*een soepelheid en tegelijk een stabiliteit*' *omdat de overtuiging leeft* '*dat de kerk haar eigen Hoofd heeft*'. *Jezus Christus* 'regeert door Zijn Woord en Geest. Het Woord blijft vast'.

Office versus leadership

Problematic for some of today's Reformed churches is the decline of knowledge and application of the theology of the office according to the Belgic Confession. In some Reformed churches today, it is difficult to find (enough) candidates to ordain and instal as elders and deacons. Moreover, congregants have a hard time understanding why the offices of elder and deacon are necessary. They consider the offices outdated. Influenced by the evangelical or Pentecostal churches, or by fresh expressions of church, they instead prefer religious leaders or a small board of governors over these offices.

This is also influenced by highly educated officers and congregants who have good jobs in society. They have a hard time understanding the slow and sometimes clumsy processes of decision-making, not to mention churches which are more occupied with church *politics* rather than church *policy*, not to speak about the gospel. They consider that pastors lack the skills to govern the church for its benefit.

Another development is the influence of management studies and good practices in free churches, with their emphasis on religious leadership rather than on the office (cf. Barentsen 2018). The offices together, especially as a symbolic sacrament approach, form a safeguard against a functional reduction and approach of the office (cf. Schaeffer 2022).

Regarding such and other developments, a group of Belgian and Dutch theologians of several theological disciplines and universities discussed religious leadership and office in a post-Christendom context over a period of ten years (cf. eds. Van den Broeke & Van der Borght 2020). In this group, there were advocates of religious leadership and of the offices. This group identified the challenges of our time, the consequences of new types of leadership, and the helpful insights of management science, but they also discussed the nature of the office and the notion of ordination with a view to liturgy and worship.

No elections

An election was a *novum* in the 16th-century Reformed churches. Congregants had the right to vote or be voted for. Moreover, it was a system

of checks and balances to prevent infringement of people who wanted to misuse the office by grasping it. Today, elections cannot be held in every church anymore, as there are not enough candidates to stand in pairs, but also because of the erosion of authority in general and the ecclesial offices specifically. Churches are already happy if congregants offer themselves for the office of elder or deacon.

◼ Charismata

Connected with the previous subsection is the notion of the *charismata* (cf. Conzelmann 1969–1973a, pp. 393–397). As the Belgic Confession focuses on the offices and the system of church governance, there seems to be less space for or no attention at all for the *charismata* in the local church. Jan Veenhof (2016, pp. 180–181) characterises these *charismata*, connected with χάρις [*charis*, grace] (cf. Conzelmann 1969–197b3) as *dienstgaven*:

> *Er is hier* [...] *geen 'hiërarchie' van gaven, maar een 'democratie'. Binnen de kerkgemeenschap moet ook het ambt in dit perspectief gezien en beleefd worden. Het ambt kan niet anders zijn dan de vormgeving van een bepaalde gave die voor het welzijn van het geheel nuttig is, maar deze gave mag nooit de 'actieradius' van de andere gaven gaan inperken of overheersen.* (pp. 363–393)

One of the problems – that there are fewer candidates for the offices of elder and deacon – also has to do with the problems church members face with these offices or themselves. Apart from the thought that they feel themselves well-equipped, they do not have a high opinion of the offices in the church. There are others who do not feel themselves equipped for one of these offices, but they are willing to carry out other tasks which match their *charismata* in the local church or the supralocal church. However, they face the fact that all these tasks connected with the *charismata* in the church are downplayed because offices are in the very centre of the church and its governance, and/or the office-bearers lord over or limit the *charismata*.

A new ecclesial development in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands regards a fourth office for professionals in the church who are not ministers, for example, youth workers or those who teach catechism (Protestantse Kerk in Nederland 2022c).

◼ The discomfort with discipline and excommunication

Because of this limitation, I include in this subsection a recent publication of Hans Schaeffer (2021, pp. 115–148). He raised the question '*Wat is er met de kerkelijke tucht gebeurd*' with a view to the ecclesial practice of the Reformed Churches Liberated [*Gereformeerde Kerken Vrijgemaakt*].

Together with students, he did qualitative and quantitative research on the functioning and the perception of ecclesial discipline. He (2021, p. 143) concluded that although ecclesial discipline is less prominent and present, it still functions. However, the discipline is applied more to the moral-ethical domain than to the doctrinal domain. Moreover, respondents value the application of ecclesial discipline as positive, although this conflicts with the high-valued notions of freedom and self-determination. On the one hand, the current quest for an appropriate application of ecclesial discipline in this denomination demonstrates a breach of its fierce identity, while on the other hand, this quest can be considered appropriate and understandable in trying to be a Reformed church keeping up with the times. Schaeffer recommends that the Reformed Churches Liberated be willing to take public account of this paradox and of their wrestling with the uneasiness regarding ecclesial discipline. According to him, this can help this denomination to reflect upon and to discuss the calling of the church.

■ Downplaying the church order

As stated, there is some tendency in Reformed circles to downplay the church order or the order in and of the church. One could call this church polity Docetism. It is the opposite of overemphasising the order. Reformed church orders are not thick books of law but rather thin. In a complex society and complex ecclesial society, this raises questions among office-bearers and in general assemblies or judicatories – for example, why the relevant church order contains so few rules and does not apply to specific cases. One can easily forget that Reformed church orders are or ought to be biblical and confessional in nature. There is no necessity that such a church order should be thick or resemble a law book. It does not need all kinds of detailed ecclesiological or confessional explanations or elaborations. Gerrit P Hartvelt (1921–2021) considered:

> *Men kan natuurlijk niet zeggen dat het protestantisme afkerig was van de institutionele aspecten, – integendeel, maar het ligt wel voor de hand dat men het geestelijk gezichtspunt geprofileerd heeft tegen de woekering van het institutionele, zoals men dat aan eigen lijf ervaren had in het eigen (rooms-katholiek) verleden.* (1991, p. 116)

The institutional side of the church is intertwined with the spiritual dimension of the church. Its fundament, by consequence, also of the church order, is the Bible and the confessions, among others the Belgic Confession (cf. Van den Broeke 2018, p. 4). They contain the ecclesiological basis, the theology of the office and the type of church governance. In this regard, Andries le Roux Du Plooy (2012, p. 3) states: '*Die gesag van die kerkorde lê nie in homself nie, maar in sy verbondenheid aan die Skrif en belydenis*'.

Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) considered in one long sentence that the confession should not be put beside (so at the same level as) the Bible – very much not above but deep underneath the Bible.

> *Met zulk eene belijdenis doet de kerk ook niet aan de volmaaktheid der H. Schrift te kort, maar spreekt zij niet anders uit, dan wat in die Schrift is vervat; de belijdenis staat niet naast, veel minder boven, maar diep onder de H. Schrift; deze is alleen αὐτόπιστος, onvoorwaardelijk tot geloof en gehoorzaamheid bindend, onveranderlijk, maar de confessie is en blijft altijd examinabel en revisibel aan de Schrift, zij is geen norma normans, maar hoogstens norma normata, geen norma veritatis, maar norma doctrinae in aliqua ecclesia receptae, ondergeschikt, feilbaar, menschenwerk, onvolkomene uitdrukking van wat de kerk uit de Schrift als Goddelijke waarheid in haar bewustzijn opgenomen heeft en thans op gezag van Gods woord tegenover alle dwaling en leugen belijdt.* (1901, p. 168)

He concludes that the confession can be object of examination and revision, since it is not *norma normans* but *norma normata* (cf. Coetzee 2016, p. 2; Du Plooy 1988, p. 11). A confession, even the Belgic Confession, is subordinate to the Bible: fallible, imperfect, as it is the product of imperfect human beings. Piet J Strauss considered the threefold relationship between the Bible, the confession and the church order as follows: '[…] *met die kerkorde as ordelike kanale vir die kerklike lewe soos verstaan vanuit die Skrif en die belydenis, wou hierdie Reformatore die Christusregering in die kerk verseker*' (Strauss 2010, p. 4). Coertzen (1998) also makes the relationship between the confession and the church order clear:

> […] the creed does not only serve as a guide for the church order, but also that the church order serves as the authenticator of the creed. The church's confession of God's order for His church is made true in the creation and implementation of its order. In view of the fact that the creed acts as a guide for the church order, assenting to the creed also means consenting to the church order, unless of course it can be proved that the church order is in conflict with the Scriptures and the confession of faith. If it becomes apparent that the creed itself is not an representation of God's law for His church, one cannot just go ones [*sic*] own way in the formulation of one's own order. (p. 53)

He explains that the creed does not only function as a guide for the church order, but the church order also functions as the authenticator of the creed. He makes clear that there is not only an intertwinement between the confession and the church order but subordinates the church order under the confession. The same applies to Willem Van't Spijker (1926–2021):

> *De belijdenis geeft de lijnen aan voor kerkordelijk denken. De kerkorde op haar beurt vergadert de kerken rondom de de belijdenis. Slechts op deze manier kan de trits van: Schrift, belijdenis en kerkorde meer zijn dan een leus, die geen wezenlijke functie heeft.* (1990, p. 329)

Janssen (2016) considers that the Belgic Confession:

> Does not offer a detailed outline of governance. It does not, in short, offer a church order, even in attenuated form. It is very modest in its claim; that is, it does not make a detailed order a matter of church confession […]. (p. 104)

As such, it is understandable that fresh expressions of church also raise all kinds of new questions or point out that answers to old questions are no longer adequate for new faith communities today, which are the fruit of missionary work (cf. Paas 2015, pp. 106–121). These questions not only include governance, leadership and finances but also belonging or membership, baptism and the Lord's Supper (cf. Protestantse Kerk in Nederland 2022b).

■ Conflict and catholicity

As mentioned above, the Lord's Day 21, QA 54, reads that the Son of God gathers a church 'out of the whole human race'. If one could confess this wholeheartedly, it might lead to a paradox, since people are also members of the visible church, and they have good, but also bad, experiences with the local church and the denomination. In an era of #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, ethnic and gender issues, the notions of diversity and inclusion are heavily debated in society, and they affect the churches as well. They struggle and must face all kinds of issues with a view to inclusion and exclusion. Today, in an era wherein authority has eroded, churches must navigate between the Bible and today's society. Reformed churches have difficulties with disagreement and diversity, whereas, they think, in the past it was more or less quite clear what one's identity was or had to be. Disagreement about females in the office, the participation of LGBTQI+ people, climate change and the pandemic challenge the churches. It is hard for churches to safeguard unity and to make clear what the nature of the church is in daily life if (groups of) members are opponents and consistories or synods are torn apart by considerations and the process of decision-making. In some cases, it leads to conflicts or schisms. Apparently, this well-known effect comes along with the Reformed nature and family. It contradicts the notion of catholicity of the Apostolic Confession, which can be related to 'universality and contextuality simultaneously' (Koffeman 2014, pp. 150–154) and in addition to today's notions of inclusion and diversity (cf. Steinacker 1989, pp. 72–80). Koffeman (2014, p. 154) bases himself on Miroslav Volf (1996, p. 67), who stated that inclusivity can only be possible if the need for reconciliation is included 'in a world where sin and exclusion are the norm'.

From the perspective of inclusion and diversity, the feminist theologian Letty Russell points out the ecclesial process between the centre and the margins. It is interesting to reflect upon the question of who decides who belongs to the centre and who to whatever margin or margins in the church. In every church there is a centre of people who are responsible, who govern and are in the middle of the ecclesial network, while others are excluded from that or exclude themselves from that. Russell made clear that many

American mainline churches were white and Protestant. However, 'this gradually changed with the inclusion of Roman Catholics and Jews' (Russell 1993, p. 83). She made an important distinction between 'confessing churches' and 'confessional churches' (Russell 1993, pp. 82–83). Being a confessional church does not necessarily mean that it is also a confessing church. Moreover, churches that want to be hospitable according to Scripture do not necessarily include space for inclusion and diversity (Russell 1993, pp. 168–181).

Even in churches which state that they are confessional, it can be easily overlooked what Article 31 of the Belgic Confession states, that every office-bearer and every congregant is called to live in peace with the minister and elders without grumbling, quarreling or fighting [*sans murmuration*] (Busch 2009, pp. 338–339). This is the ideal picture. The daily practice demonstrates the opposite: brokenness and disunity. Bavinck corrects the view that the unity of Christ's church depends on the Reformed office-bearers and congregants or on the confession, the church order and the denomination. He (cf. 1901, p. 486) points out that the unity of the church is an organism which lies in Christ.

■ Diaconate and society

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis, the war in Ukraine, the ecological crisis and the rise of prices for energy and many other products – all these are a call to deacons to apply the notion that the church is church for others and has a focus on society. Reflecting on government according to Article 30 of the Belgic Confession, it is not only about the tasks of ministers and elders but also about the deacons. Their task to help and comfort the poor and the afflicted is current and still (or again) relevant in this society, wherein so many people are in social and economic despair and afflicted. According to the Belgic Confession, the church has an assignment to help and assist them. Some examples of those forms of help include involvement with food banks, clothing banks, second-hand shops and shelters for homeless people and migrants, such as people from Ukraine.

■ Conclusion

Articles 30, 31 and 32 of the Belgic Confession deal with the Reformed system of church governance, the theology of the offices and discipline and excommunication. These articles offer a theological and confessional framework. They do not elaborate on this governance, theology and discipline in detail into a church order. Moreover, their goal for the order of the church is not a law book but a sacred and inviolable church order. Regulations are a matter of belief. The confession leaves space for the

ecclesial development within the given confessional framework. The office-bearers should respect their stewardship and avoid their tendency to lordship. There is only one Lord, one Universal Bishop, one King: Jesus Christ. It mirrors the struggle of the Reformed then and now to deal with the fear of hierarchy and authority. Elections form a protest against unlimited authority and power and the decoy of abuse; the same applies for the emphasis on the *ministerium* instead of the *magisterium*. The Reformed type of church governance can be characterised as collegial leadership. The context of today's churches differs from the 1560s, whether or not ecclesial, societal or political developments lead to deviations from the 16th-century Belgic Confession: the decline of the offices (in some churches no elections take place anymore), the discomfort with the application of discipline or excommunication, the decline or at least the underestimation of the church order, conflict and catholicity. There are also developments which can be considered as varieties within or challenges for the ecclesial and church polity framework of this confession: a supralocal office-bearer, less attention for the *charismata*, new possibilities for diaconate for today's society. Moreover, fresh expressions of church raise new questions and require new answers to old questions. All these developments express in one way or the other the relevance of the Belgic Confession. This confession mirrors officers and congregants to reflect on the nature of the church, church governance, the offices and discipline, to (re-)realise and not to forget that in the end, it is not their church but that of Jesus Christ. By doing so, the Reformed church keeps God's holy order.

Chapter 11

Widening wings? Re-emphasising sacramental 'joyful exchange' (Articles 33–35)

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■ Introduction

'Therefore, my brothers (and sisters), let us become humble and not tempt God and think that we can fly without wings (including sacramental ones)'.[177] This exhortation, in a sermon of the Reformer Calvin (1941, pp. 55–56), confronts our contemporary Reformed sacramental understanding and experience with the often inconvenient question: what happens, in its widest and deepest sense, when we 'do' our ecclesiastical sacraments? (See Lewis 2003, p. 394; also Welker 2000, p. 1, for a thematising of this very question.) To tap into the metaphorical language of the quote above: what happens in enacting the spreading of the wings, the taking flight and the eventual soaring into the heights? The whole happening, including

177. Translations from non-English sources are the author's own, except where indicated otherwise.

all these aspects, totally depends on the Holy Spirit's mysterious working. 'The wind [*pneuma*] blows wherever it pleases' (Jn 3:8).[178] This cannot be stressed too much. Yet the visible sacramental means of grace that he uses (the wings in their spreading-out action) invite continuous scrutiny as to their aptness for the Holy Spirit's working through them. Being visible gospel promises, performed in faith as underlining of the spoken Word, they should thus always again be sounded out for their conformity to the living Word of God in the words of human beings (Holy Scripture). This is what the present inquiry into Articles 33–35 of the Belgic Confession[179] aims to do. It attempts to re-emphasise an apparently neglected aspect of the 'wing-spreading enactment': the sacramental happening of the 'wonderful exchange' [*mirifica commutatio*], an expression that Calvin (1962, p. 558; *Inst*. IV.17.2; also Bakker 1978, p. 37, for further references) employs explicitly in a sacramental context. The motif of a 'joyful exchange' [*fröhliche Wechsel* or, alternatively, *fröhliche Tausch und Wettstreit*] was an *expressis verbis* used by Luther (1964, p. 169) in his famous work of 1520, *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* [*The freedom of a Christian*] – and there applied to the heart of his rediscovery of justification by faith. In that move, Luther embroidered further on the use of 'bridal imagery from classic theological and mystical traditions' (see Malcolm 2017, p. 5; also Schwager 1986, pp. 210–211). This fundamental imagery of the joyful bridal exchange, however, is dispersed through Luther's thought 'in always newer twists', including his sacramental theology (see Asendorf 1988, pp. 367–368, with references from primary sources). The question, then, of 'what happens in the sacraments?' could lead to incisive rethinking. Can we really soar 'ecstatically' (*extra nos in Christo* – outside ourselves in Christ) when our sacramental wings are not spread out to their fullest proportions in expectation of the Spirit's unfathomable wind? Or have we succumbed to a 'domesticated in-folding' of these wings to fit our own mediocre ways – the ways infinitely 'lower' than the triune God's (Is 55:8)?[180] Have we thus – perhaps inadvertently[181] – become insensitive to the profoundest

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178. In his recent, stimulating commentary, Ford (2021, p. 63) draws the scene with Nicodemus into the *dramatic thrust* of John's whole gospel.

179. According to Bakhuizen van den Brink (1976, pp. 26–27), the authentic texts of the Belgic Confession are their French and Dutch rendering; he, however, lauds the Latin text by Hommius as excellent; it might 'sometimes be read better than the Dutch'. In the following, we usually cite the Latin text, sometimes especially to facilitate comparison with Latin texts of Calvin. We also consult the most recent standard English translation (included in eds. Beeke & Ferguson 2002, pp. vii, 208–231).

180. On these *higher ways* of the Lord, covenantal sustenance comes through 'a sign, sacrament, and gesture of an alternative. It is an alternative that touches everything, economics as well as liturgy' (see Brueggemann 1993, p. 87).

181. It is vital to understand that some developments were *unintended* at their historical incipience (see Gregory 2012, p. 368).

visible happening that 'exhibits' the grace of 'the God who is beyond in the midst of our lives' (see Bonhoeffer 1965, p. 135)?[182]

Our hypothesis is that re-emphasising the *sacramental* happening of 'joyful exchange' will lead to a more balanced and fuller celebration (that is: 'wing-spreading enacting') that is 'conducive' to the Holy Spirit's mysterious intervention. A good – although deficient – comparison is the 'action' of 'catching' sleep (see Smith 2013, p. 65). When going to sleep, one usually *moves* one's body towards a more horizontal position, perhaps curling up expectantly for sleep to 'overcome' one. The action itself of falling asleep is *beyond* our control. Likewise, we are prompted by the Spirit *to perform the sacramental-embodied, expectant faith-enacting*; the *mystery* that 'overcomes' us in the deepest *commutation* is beyond our control, in the Holy Spirit's power. Sacramental actions say (Cantalamessa 2003):

> Come, Spirit, from the pierced side of Christ on the cross!
> Come on the breath blowing from the lips of the Risen Jesus! (p. 22)

The bridge between the mainly dogmatic, propositional language of the Belgic Confession and actual liturgical 'ritual performances' might be considerably shortened by the 'translating' of relevant confessional affirmations into a more concrete, dynamic, body-sensitive 'language-game'[183]:

> We publicly assert our faith, so that not only do our hearts breathe, but our tongues also, and *all the members of our body*, in every way they can, proclaim the praise of God. (Calvin 1962b, p. 529; *Inst*. 4.15.13; my emphasis added)

◼ Re-emphasising and *theologia reformanda*

We conduct this investigation with an intense awareness that our present knowledge is *fragmentary*; it is as if the triune God holds us in suspense about the *full, eschatological* answer to the riddle, which he mirrors in a profound 'play' of love with his children (see Van Ruler 1975, pp. 158–160, meditating on 1 Cor 13:12a). This eschatological, transitional status,

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182. The term 'exhibiting' is derived from the Latin *exhibere* ['to show' or 'hold forth'], as used by Article 33 in describing the function of the sacraments (see Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 131). Calvin used the word *exhibere* and its derivative forms to express his conviction that 'the thing signified is *truly offered*, *truly communicated*, with the sign, symbol or figure and objectively so'. Although the Belgic Confession's utterances on the sacraments do not exclusively rest on Calvin's theology, it cannot be denied that Guido de Brès was, in most of his formulations, decisively influenced by his theological mentor from Geneva (see Gerrish 1966, p. 235; Wandel 2006, pp. 174, 196). In this inquiry, we will therefore continuously interact with the Reformer's views as a certain foil to the articles.

183. The term 'language game' does not imply a lack of seriousness. According to its originator, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'it is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of *an activity* or a form of *life*' (see Thiselton 2017, p. 116 for this quote; [*emphasis in the original*]).

naturally, also pertains to our confessions. The Belgic Confession is also *semper reformanda* [always to be reformed]. Certainly, it reflects authoritative and ecclesiastically binding hermeneutic decisions, which nobody may question 'lightly' but, if needs be, only 'gravely', that is, through legitimate *gravamina*. Surely, Articles 33–35 reflect many of the sacramental controversies in the 16th century (see Beeke & Ferguson 1999, pp. 209–215, 268; Berkouwer 1954, pp. 29–107; Horton 2011, pp. 763–771; Lohse 1974, pp. 170–176), and it also forms a 'centre of gravity' where many issues treated in the Belgic Confession elsewhere are playing a role (see Jonker 1994, p. 79).

Yet, from the vantage point of a later paradigm, the *same confessional subject-matter might surely be* re-emphasised – *precisely to convey the same meaning as differently calibrated* (see Küng 1991, pp. 125–126). Re-emphasising can also include awareness of paradigm shifts. Küng (1995, pp. 544–547) writes (and it indeed seems plausible) regarding the Reformation paradigm shift that it encompassed a certain *continuity* and simultaneously a certain *discontinuity* of 'substance' with the previous ones (both moves based on the gospel). In a related way, it may be possible to detect, by means of that 'immensely fertile' (Caputo 2013, p. 236) notion of paradigm shifts, possible 'discontinuities' and 'continuities' in cultural and theological 'enframing' (see Žižek 2014, pp. 7–32 on this important concept) between the Reformation era and our own. Indeed, as Küng (1995, pp. 547–549) argues compellingly, 'a paradigm shift is not a change of faith'.

Of course, we do not canonise Calvin. He had his 'blinkers'; nevertheless, we can still expect a few 'surprises' from his gigantic *oeuvre* (see Oberman 1988, pp. 14, 24–35). Reverting to a Kuyperian metaphor, it is as if we hang up our confession like an *Aeolian Harp* – '*its strings tuned aright* – ready in the window of God's Holy Zion, awaiting the breath of the Spirit'. This is how we want to relate our present *reformanda* call to the winged words of Kuyper – at the end of his famous *Lectures on Calvinism* in Princeton in 1889 (see Kuyper 2015, p. 187; also Mouw 2020, p. 341). It is thus a humble attempt to *re-attune,* with respect and humility and in total dependence on the Word and the Wind of the Spirit, some possibly worn-out and loose harp strings – and even to suggest other probably legitimate string settings. In this way, we might hear *the music in these articles* even clearer – especially as to its existential-pastoral resonance against the soundboard of our times. 'Let Calvinism (including its confession on the sacraments) be nothing but such an Aeolian Harp, – absolutely powerless, as it is, without the quickening Spirit of God' (Kuyper 2015, p. 187).[184]

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184. We are wary of any fanaticism, specifically of fanatic Calvinism, which – frequently without one realising it – can lead to a *stifling tunnel vision*, which sees practically only the negative in differing worldviews. Particularly toxic forms in this regard can be many 'Calvinistic fundamentalisms' (see Berger & Zijderveld

■ Sacrament as dramatic kingdom event

The vast and dynamic reality of the kingdom of the triune God is the broadest horizon into which the wings of our sacraments are meant to let us soar. We can benefit from the *recent Reformed turn* (or arguably, '*return*') *to a biblically inspired* '*theology of the coming of the triune God's kingdom or reign*' (see especially Van Wyk 2015, pp. 207–228, 2020, pp. 192–199; see also Snyman 1977, pp. 139–283). Surely, the kingdom of God should not be conceived of as an ideologically definable, humanly constructible entity (a view that was not uncommon during the church's history) but rather – with Welker (2012, pp. 208–219, 194–202) – as an '*emergent event*', structured according to the *munus triplex* [threefold office] of Christ and his Christians. 'The sacraments are [...] related to [...] the coming of God's Kingdom in the Messiah' (Berkouwer 1954, p. 112). As such, the metaphor of the '*theodrama* of God's kingdom' – structurally akin to Dante's masterpiece *The divine comedy* – would be a promising mode in which the sacramental aspect of the emergent kingdom can be articulated as if in the '*unfolding* of a drama' (see Horton 2011, pp. 19, 21; Ford 2011, pp. 23–42; see also the recent, probing dissertation of Moes 2022, *passim*). No wonder Calvin could state: 'God gave us a place *as if in a theatre* [...] in order that we should encompass the *whole* world history' (see Kruger 2019, p. 8 for the full quotation; [*author's added emphasis*]). The liturgical 'happening' or 'enactment' of the sacraments in the 'heavenly theatre' [*coelestis theatrum*] of a worship service (Calvin 1970, p. 901; see Selderhuis 2000, p. 217 for the original Latin; see also Horton 2014, pp. 142–153) emit their faith-succouring impulses (see especially Welker 2012, p. 257, on the priestly impact of the sacraments) into the *whole kingdom-existence of a Christian* in the world outside, *embodied*[185] *in its threefold 'role' (office)*.[186] Sacramental events participate in the

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(footnote 184 continues...)

2009, pp. 69–87). Our refocusing attempt is not uncritical of Calvin, although it mainly follows his lead. Whether or not his teaching on *double predestination* impinged on the Belgic Confession's sacramental stance, as Wandel (2006, p. 197) opines, we decisively maintain that his view on *gemina praedestinatio* is unscriptural (see especially the explicit heading in Calvin 1962b, p. 202; *Inst*. 3.21). It cannot be defended with a good conscience today and is contrary to the 'Epilogue' of the Canons of Dort's *repudiation* of the thesis that God predestines some to damnation in the same way [*eodem modo*] as he elects some to eternal life (see Berkouwer 1974, pp. 97–148 – 'for the heart of the church').

185. In a theodramatic perspective, the 'threefold office' indicates the *'dramatis personae'* and the 'dramatic roles' (see Van Der Kooi 2019, p. 250) in the 'covenant correlation' of God and man in the kingdom-drama. Van Wyk (2015, p. 199) describes the relation between kingdom and covenant convincingly: 'The covenant is the internal form [Afrikaans: *gestalte*] of the kingdom and the kingdom is the external form of the covenant'. The 'correlation' in the covenant is such that God and his promises always precede humans and their faith (see Berkouwer 1954, pp. 192–193).

186. Smith (2013, pp. iii, 14–15) contends powerfully for viewing worship as an *event of imagining* the kingdom of God. It involves 'a conversion of the imagination effected by the Spirit, who recruits our most

'Trinitarian enactment' which is worship, including sacramental worship (see Witvliet 1999, p. 146). Besides, such an approach might instil largely untapped early Christian energies into this enterprise. In Van Wyk's (2018, pp. 83–87, 73–77) seminal *magnum opus* on the African church father Augustine, he provides clear stimuli for a rethinking in this direction. In an *African* theological inquiry like the present, openness to such ancient Augustinian and other African impulses relating sacraments to kingdom theology must be resolutely cultivated.[187] In this way, it could stimulate a sacramental '*kleurryke teologie*' [richly coloured theology] of the 'manifold or many-coloured wisdom of God' [Greek: *polipoikilos sophia*] (Eph 3:10; see already the inspiring plea of Snyman 1977, p. 427 – albeit in an obsolete and toxic political context).[188]

Primacy of the 'who question'

Bonhoeffer (1965, pp. 45–46) emphasises that the right question should be: '*Who* is present in the sacrament?' If we seek true wisdom about the sacraments, we cannot think of ourselves as being in this world 'without forthwith turning [our] thoughts towards the God in whom [we] live and move' (see Calvin 1864; also 1962a, p. 37). Rightly, it was said of this opening statement in his *magnum opus* (Horton 2014):

> The goal for Calvin, then, is not to find a 'what' but a 'who', not an essence, but an active agent in history. *That requires a story, not a speculation*. We know the Giver through his gifts, and we know ourselves as the beneficiaries of those gifts. (p. 47; [*author's added emphasis*])

Outline

The body of this research must, firstly, provide glimpses of the whole creation's sacramentality as background relief to the following; secondly, in the second to the third sections, the theme will be related to Articles 33–35

(footnote 186 continues…)

fundamental desires by a kind of narrative enchantment – by inviting us narrative animals into a story [the kingdom-drama] that seeps into our bones and becomes the orienting background of our being in the world'.

187. Van Wyk's congenial treatment whets the appetite to study Augustine. His clear summary of salient points in Augustine's *De civitate Dei* Van Wyk (2018, pp. 83–87) should inspire any Reformed theologian to practise a theology of the kingdom. Oden (2007, pp. 3, 42–61) compellingly argues that early African Christianity formed a 'seedbed of Western Christianity', and thus, for its part, it undoubtedly also 'shaped the Christian mind', including the sacramental. This shaping permeated Africa (even to the far south) for many precolonial centuries (see Küng 2002, p. 26).

188. Calvin (1962b, p. 171; *Inst*. III.20.23) refers to the 'manifold wisdom' of Ephesians 3:11 as if it is being displayed in a *theatrical* church service.

of the Belgic Confession, respectively; thirdly, a brief reviewing remark will be made.

■ Overview

■ The sacramental creation

To more clearly locate the area around our re-emphasis, a few strokes might be helpful on the broader canvas upon which the phenomenon of 'the sacramental' appears. This concurs with the observation of Williams (2000, p. 199; [*author's added emphasis*]) that 'sacraments might be harder to understand the more we *isolate* them as […] unique actions', that is, as limited actions that belong exclusively to the Christian liturgical sphere. To follow[189] the 'remarkably sophisticated notion of signification' in Calvin's sacramental theology (see Conradie 2013, p. 70) would assist us in properly situating our *centripetal efforts* within an overall horizon of current centrifugal symbolic research. The Genevan Reformer virtually 'pre-empts' wide-spread later palaeontological insights into the relation of signs and the signified reality – as gained especially in the newest investigations on the threshold period between *hominins* and *homo sapiens*.[190] In his fascinating Gifford Lectures of 2004, the post-foundational theologian Wentzel Van Huyssteen (2006, pp. 217–270) argues cogently for a direct link between human uniqueness and humanity's faculty of symbolisation. One outstanding expression of early human symbolisation (amongst several) is the Upper Palaeolithic creation of *handprints* on the walls of many caves (about 18,000–10,000 years ago). Those handprints suggest that the rock wall resembles a membrane or veil between humans and the unseen spirit world behind its surface. The handprints of the cave artists might mean that they desired to 'touch' that world beyond the seen. With Van Huyssteen (2006, p. 252; emphasis added; see also Cunningham 2010,

189. An eye-opener it is, indeed, when Van de Beek (1996, p. 116) surmises that Calvin, over against many later Calvinists and in the light of his Genesis Commentary, would have 'no difficulty with the evolution theory'. One can also agree with Zizioulas (2011, p. 150) that Darwinism might be seen as a 'blessing in disguise' to Christian theology, for it undermined many forms of Scholastic teachings on the image of God, which they understood as residing in human beings' rationality.

190. It would exceed the limits of this chapter to discuss the courageous yet controversial attempt of Teilhard de Chardin *to integrate* the Christian sacramental view of things into a modern evolutionistic worldview. One can find in his profound *Mass of the World* words like these (De Chardin 1961, p. 5): 'Rich with the sap of the world, I rise up towards the Spirit whose vesture is the magnificence of the material universe, but who smiles at me from far beyond all victories […]'. Some resemblance – despite deep divergences – can be detected with Calvin's sacramental view of the universe as a 'beautiful garment of God' (see Zachman 1997, pp. 305–312; for critical appraisals of Teilhard's project, see Durand 2013, pp. 281–326; Küng 2007a, pp. 97–100).

pp. 252–253, 418–419; Villa-Vicencio 2021, pp. 21–22), we are inclined to view this 'touching' as a 'deeply *sacramental* moment'. Viewing these 'sacramental' light shafts reflected in the Book of Nature through the divine light radiating from the Book of Scripture (cf. Article 2 of our Confession), we see in them 'the Light' of the cosmic Christ and the cosmic Holy Spirit suffusing the total creation (thus following the wonderful lodestar for our thinking: 'In thy light we see the light', Ps 36:9). With good reason, Boulton (2011, p. 104; emphasis added) avers that 'for Calvin, we are in fact *awash* in God'. It is remarkable that the Genevan Reformer's first scriptural reference in the *Institutes* is to Acts 17:28: *in* God we live, move, and have our being. With this telling allusion (coupled with six more appearances of this text throughout his whole book), Calvin's *sacramental worldview* is strongly underlined. He is a 'sacramental theologian' *par excellence* (Wolterstorff, as quoted by Lane 2011, p. 82). For him, 'God is present to and in all things in such a way that all things are in and to God' (Shults 2005, p. 107). The following quote from Calvin is illuminating (Shults 2005):

> [*The Spirit is*] being diffused over all space, sustaining, invigorating, and quickening all things, both in heaven and on earth...his transfusing vigour into all things, breathing into them being, life and motion, is plainly divine. (p. 102, line 13–15; cf. 1962a, p. 122)

This accent on the sacramentality of the 'Spirit-suffused'[191] cosmos seems to have been greatly reduced in the West – also amongst many later followers of Calvin[192] – particularly under the influence of Descartes and his ripping apart of the human being as *res cogitans* and nature as dead *res extensa* (see McGrath 2007, pp. 263–264; Zizioulas 2011, pp. 149–150; also Pelikan 1987, pp. 180–183, 205–216). Voices[193] crying for a sacramental 'return' resound in our times. A strong proponent for such a sacramentally renewed 'awakening of the divine within the bread and wine of ordinary existence' is Kearney (2011, pp. 85–87). He weaves this retrieval into his stimulating and thought-provoking project of *anatheism*. Francis of Assisi appears to be an appropriate role-model (see Mcfague 1997, pp. 172–175)

191. Calvin's perspective on the Creator Spirit is well documented from references in his *Institutes*, Commentaries and Sermons (see Krusche 1959, pp. 15–25).

192. The neglect of the general sacramentality of creation is more noxious in Calvin's epigones than in Luther's. He saw it *merely* as a parabolic representation. According to Van Der Leeuw (1959, p. 63), the latter perspective gave way in Calvin to a view that draws *sign* and *signified* extremely close to each other. This harks back 'to the ancient-biblical thinking'. As it was further developed, the Lutheran account 'directly led to Descartes'. One salient example of early Christian sacramental language is the wonderful confession of Irenaeus concerning the whole Earth: 'the crucified Son of God [is] *inscribed crosswise upon it all'* (Irenaeus 1920, p. 8; [*author's added emphasis*]).

193. When theological interest in this sacramentality had nearly died down in post-Reformation times, it was sometimes artistic people who stepped in, including Rembrandt van Rijn, who sensed the divine transparency of nature acutely, and Vincent van Gogh, who painted gospel-light shining through nature and humanity (see Visser't Hooft 1956, pp. 78–83; Wessels 2000, pp. 129–148).

in such re-sacramentalisation of nature (parallel *to* a 're-enchantment of nature' [McGrath 2003, *passim*]). In a courageous encyclical letter of 2015, Pope Francis (2015) follows his namesake energetically. It already becomes clear in the opening of this probing document, which also suggested its official name:

> 'LAUDATE SI', mi Signore – Praise be to you, My Lord! In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminded us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms and embraces us. (p. 1)[194]

Surely, words like these and many more in this encyclical would blend in seamlessly with what Calvin (1975, p. 57) wrote with such intense passion about, for example, the 'delight' our inhalation of 'the sweet and pleasant fragrance from herbs and flowers' gives us, while simultaneously realising that 'in those very things […] there dwells such an immensity of divine power, goodness, and wisdom, as absorbs all our senses'. A timely reconsideration of this Reformed general sacramentology – providing it accords with *sola scriptura* (see Berkouwer 1954, pp. 6, 7) – is imperative for stimulating us to work urgently on the idea and construction of an 'ecological society and perhaps [in] finding a community that is a foretaste of that civilization [society]' (see Cobb 2020, p. 74). 'Can we chant Psalms with all God's creatures?' To this heart-searching question regarding the sacramentality of creation (see Lane 2011, pp. 87–96), Reformed people – with the Belgic Confession and the beloved Psalms in our hearts and mouths – must be the first to shout: 'Yes'.[195] A compelling invitation to such a retrieval resounds through a poem, called 'Heaven and earth',[196] by an esteemed Potchefstroom poet-professor of a previous generation. Here is a fragment (Buys 1977):

> The liturgy of this service is this:
>
> at daybreak the sun stretches out his hands

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194. In a moving biography by GK Chesterton (2008, pp. 70–73), he writes how Francis of Assisi 'saw all things dramatically', and 'thus he himself was always dramatic', for example, addressing the fire that was meant as a remedy to cure his blindness as 'Brother Fire […] be courteous to me'.

195. Rightly, Berkouwer (1954, pp. 20–23, 27–28) warns that a 'mere denunciation' of sacramentalism (a strong tendency to which he discerns in Van der Leeuw's accentuation of the incarnation in the sacraments) would not do justice to 'its reaction against the *underplaying* of the sacraments'.

196. Cloete (1988, p. 4) is perfectly to the point in saying: 'the whole faith of Buys is grounded therein that heaven and earth / sacrament / and reality [*are*] *bound in union together*'. Buys showed his deep insight into the sacramentality even of ordinary woodwork tools on a Monday morning: they become, says he, 'in my hand / the substantives of a sacrament' [from the poem – *nota bene!* – 'Unio mystica' in the anthology *Pleroma*] (Buys 1970, p. 58). The epigraph of the latter book provides a key text for our *re-appropriating* authentic Reformed general sacramentality urgently today: *Do not I* [*God*] *fill heaven and earth* (Jr 23:24)?

over the earth, and lets his blessings flow;
presently rises in his glow

a *praise song* from the plains below …

Where all around so clear a lineament
of God's nearness gives, *there sacrament*

and reality are beautifully bound.
And when the day is done and the wind's sound

at twilight plays its final praise,
in the last light the sun's hands raise

and in conclusion its mild rays
a blessing on the lonely landscape lays. (pp. 11–12; author's translation
and added emphasis)

■ The meaning of specific ecclesiastical sacraments (Art. 33)

Outline: Having given a bird's eye view of general sacramentality, we now attend to the specific ecclesiastical 'sacramentology', as Article 33 articulates it. We engage firstly with the sacraments' institution by the triune God and the reason thereof; secondly, with their affirming of the kingdom promises as visible words presented to our senses in addition to the gospel's spoken words; thirdly, with their exhibiting externally what is being done in our hearts inside [*quam quae in cordibus nostris interne operatur*].

The good God's institution: The key difference between the general, creational sacraments, discussed above, and the *specific* ecclesiastical sacraments, treated in the Belgic Confession, is already being crystallised out in the first sentence of Article 33. It implies that the only 'sacraments' that can legitimately be called this are the two Protestant ecclesiastical sacraments. The reason is that God has 'spoken to, named and sanctified' (these) *particular*, material entities within his created world (see Bonhoeffer 1965, p. 42) and explicitly *instituted* them as signifiers in his service (see also Van Der Zee 2004, p. 23, especially on Calvin). Notably, this action is ascribed to 'our *good* God'. In a *reformanda*-re-emphasising perspective, the *existential tone* of this appellation should be resonated strongly in our present anti-scholastic paradigm shift. It should echo the full and deep comfort of the Belgic Confession Article 1's exuberant ending: *God is 'the*

most overflowing fountain of everything that is good'.[197] Moreover – different from many traditional Reformed dogmatic treatments, namely in the first place to discuss generic attributes of God – our sacramental refocusing should primarily concentrate on *who* the God is in whom we live, move and have our being. This ineffable 'Fountain of all good' is the Triune – in no way comparable to the domesticated, bourgeois, Western God, the lonely, immanent 'Apex' of a secularised universe. Where Western Christians today live with an inter-religious encounter at our front door – not least the Islamic challenge[198] – this distinct 'trinitarian spreading' *across all aspects* of our Christian confession must be rediscovered. It opens wide vistas and undermines sacramental small-mindedness (see Noordmans 1954, p. 33).

'Visible' words: In sync with the consensus amongst all magisterial Reformers, the Belgic Confession affirms that the sacraments are given only as *additions* or *addenda* to the preached word. This is vital. The gracious God bows down to us miserable sinners and *speaks* to us, not only like a nurse speaking to children 'as it were lisping' [*quoddammodo balbutire*] (see Calvin 1864, p. 96; cf. Calvin 1962a, p. 110), but he *also* uses tangible material sign language to enact and pledge his spoken and written gospel promises with the material 'props' he ordained.

The reason for sacraments: The reason which Article 33 advances for this divine institution is: 'on account of our weakness and infirmities' [*habita hebetudinis et infirmitatis nostrae ratione*]. The word 'weakness' here has undertones of torpidness and obtuseness. With this meaning, the Belgic Confession directly follows Calvin's reasoning. Thus, a few remarks on this – according to some critics – 'curious' rationale are in order. These observers detect a 'Platonising' thread in Calvin's anthropology looming here against the Belgic Confession's background understanding (see Trimp 1983, pp. 116–117). Amongst other references, a particularly telling instance of the perceived 'tendency' is this (Calvin 1864; cf. Calvin 1962b, pp. 492–493; there also follows an affirming quote from Chrysostom which includes as reason: 'because our souls are implanted in bodies'):

> [*In the sacraments*] our merciful God [...] accommodates himself to our capacity, that *seeing from our animal nature*, we are always creeping on the ground and

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197. This phrase was not in De Bres' original version; thus, it 'was less "pastoral" in tone here than we might think'. This is the admirable comment of Beck (2016, p. 26), who showed that these 'encouraging' words were added by the Synod of Antwerp (1566). Ironically, this fountain metaphor is *Calvin's* 'fundamental image of God' (says Gerrish 1993, p. 26, with good reason). It seems as if this is an early instance of de Bres excluding 'some important resonances' of Calvin's views from the *Belgica* (see Wandel 2006, p. 196, referring to Art. 33).

198. 'The clash of civilisations seems to have become a self-fulfilling prophecy'. What the theologian with the astounding global horizon, Küng (2007a, p. xxiv), already articulated in these words some time ago seems only to be intensifying in this third decade of our century; yet the opportunities for responsible dialogue also grow (see Villa-Vicencio 2021, pp. 50–52, 134–143).

cleaving to the flesh, *having no thought of what is spiritual* [...] He declines not [...] even in the flesh to exhibit a mirror of spiritual blessing. (p. 243)

Remarkably, the Belgic Confession bypasses any dualistic anthropological traces which they did, or did not, find[199] in Calvin and only concentrates on the weakness and fleshly, material dullness for which God provides the sacraments as aids. It further does not mention the spiritual deficiency of our animal nature. It does, however, seem to locate the necessity of sacramental helps to humanity as made in the image of God *already before the Fall*. The *Tree of Life in Eden* already had a sacramental significance. Christ himself was already 'exhibited' through that tree to show that the human being [*ha-adam*], right from the beginning, was created towards *unio mystica* with him, the Mediator who possessed the fullness of humanity. He is the true image of God, that is, the perfect human or last Adam [*eschatos Adam*] (1 Cor 15:45). In stressing (or even overstressing) the sluggishness, weakness and 'imperfection' of pre-fallen human's 'longing heart' (see Augustine 2004, p. 5) 'Calvin can appear to be against humanness, but he is *only* against a *humanness not in communion with Christ*. It takes careful reading to pull these two apart' (Canlis 2009, p. 100; author's added emphasis). This can point to a Christian humanism for which some rightly find a stimulus in Calvin – and which by far transcends secularist humanisms in radical humanness (see De Gruchy 2009, pp. 229–231; Torrance 1996, p. 31). For Calvin (1863; [*author's added emphasis*]; cf. Canlis 2009, p. 95):

There is nothing in which man excels *the lower animals* [*quo beluam homo antecellat*] unless by his *spiritual communion* [*communicatio*] *with God* in the hope of a blessed eternity. (p. 392)

In the trinitarian God's overflowing goodness, this communion into which humans were originally created had to be strengthened by letting them sense more and more how weak and dependent they would be without the Mediator. God thus used '*external images*' like the Tree of Life to 'lead us further, even to our Lord Jesus Christ'. By making humanity's hands and hearts empty of any self-reliance, God bestowed on them a more intense participation in the emerging kingdom of completed humanness, where God will be all in all through Christ and in the Spirit. After the Fall into sin, the sacraments became a 'remedy' for a 'disease' humanity had brought on itself. Of this 'remedy', the ecclesiastical sacraments are the signs and seals.

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199. We admit, of course, that Calvin is a child of his time. Robinson (2015, p. 228) can find support for anthropology that opposes reductionist, materialistic definitions of humanity in his view of the soul as an 'experience' of the whole self and the 'place of encounter' with God. 'If substance is only energy in a particular state, then the opposition of soul and body is a false opposition, and our passing through nature to eternity a different thing than we imagine' (see Robinson 2015, pp. 237–238). Nevertheless, what Van Der Walt (2010, pp. 224–258) detects – with solid documentation – as *Platonic traces* in Calvin's discourse, should at least challenge us to revisit some cherished ideas we sometimes take over uncritically from the Reformer.

By being excommunicated from the Tree of Life, fallen humankind would become 'more astonished, and *having become guilty*, would aspire more earnestly after the remedy' – that is, eventually, *full* communion with Christ, already exhibited in the sacramental events (Reinke 2009, p. 2, quoting a Calvin sermon on Gn 3:22–24; author's added emphasis). Indeed, the compassionate Father knows how vulnerable he has formed us (like the flowers and the grass) – originally as innocent dust, which then became *guilty dust*. Yet he renews our youth like that of an eagle (Ps 103; see Van de Beek 2000, pp. 79–83).

In short, the sacraments let our faith soar – the faith which '*embraces* Jesus Christ and all his benefits, [which] makes him our own and searches nothing else than him' (Belgic Confession, Art. 22).[200]

◼ Baptism into Christ into a life of communion

Introduction: It would not be far-fetched to characterise 'baptism' as a 'concertina' word; its meaning could be stretched and shrunk according to different tunes played (see Erickson 1999, p. 46). It seems as if Article 34 mirrors something of that indefiniteness. At least, it orients itself more to Zwingli and Bullinger than to Calvin. 'Different types of sacramental theology' and 'strange combinations' are said to be reflected here. The ideas of 'enlistment' and 'parallelistic representation' (as sure as *that is* […] as sure as *this is*) seem to overshadow Calvin's accent on the ineffable 'real presence' of Christ and the concomitant '*unio mystica*' with him in baptism (see Gerrish 1966, p. 235). Our heading to this section (from Torrance 1996, p. 63) highlights some accents of Calvin's baptismal theology, which are *underemphasised* in Article 34. The following subdivisions, however, we could borrow from the lines 6 to 14 of the Article; they indeed provide helpful handles for blending more Calvinian accents with the original articulations (see Bakhuizen van den Brink 1976, p. 133, for the original Latin; author's own translation):

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200. Awareness of paradigm-shifts must not blind us to the continuous significance of the two-books metaphor (Belgic Confession, Art. 2; see also McGrath 2019, pp. 160–165). Van den Brink (2020, pp. 29–30) taps the potential of that metaphor responsibly – a move that is courageous, compelling and relevant to our inquiry. 'Recontextualizing the notions of Fall, human death and original sin within an evolutionary context makes the Christian doctrine of redemption come out stronger' (Van den Brink 2020, p. 202). In an extremely *condensed* summary of Van den Brink's argument: human beings in their emerged animal nature were made to be human only in communion with Christ (and given *sacramental aid*). They *gradually* fell into original sin by refusing that God-given communion and choosing *to work themselves* out of their animal bruteness (see Calvin's '*beluam*'). 'The first human beings fell, not from a state of spiritual perfection but surely from a state of *innocence*. It was their turning away from God's fellowship […] that made the first human beings guilty'. What was *animaliter natural* to them – before being chosen out of other pre-human 'hominins' – then *became unnatural, contra* God's ordinance, and made them *guilty* by not – or merely brokenly – mirroring God (see Van den Brink 2020, pp. 193–194).

> Jesus Christ has *abolished circumcision* which involved blood and has instituted in its place the sacrament of baptism, by which we are *received* into the church of God and *separated* from all other people and strange religions that we may *wholly belong* to him whose ensign and banner we bear, and which serves as a testimony unto us that he will forever be our gracious Father. (p. 133)

Reception and separation: It is undoubtedly true that we are, by baptism, received into the church and separated from non-Christians, that baptism serves as a testimony of our having a Father that lovingly disperses grace on us and that the outward baptismal rite is an ensign and banner that we wholly belong to Christ. Yet we should understand these actions not as mere '*nuda signa*' [naked signs]. Then, some vital echoes from Calvin would not resound as clearly as they should.[201] Calvin (1962b, p. 513; *Inst*. IV.15.1; [*author's added emphasis*]) explicitly says: 'Baptism is the initiatory sign by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the church, that being *engrafted into Christ we may be accounted children of God*'. The 'mysterious more' of Calvin – which does not fit into Zwingli's 'rationalism' (see Gerrish 1993, pp. 75–76) – does not emerge in Article 34. This silence might be one of the reasons why 'functional theologies', apparently imbibed by many Reformed congregations, might have 'domesticated' their baptismal happenings into mere conventionalities (see Billings 2018, pp. 26, 36); they seem to be oblivious of the deep mystical reality of baptism, which 'plunges us into the waters of his [Christ's] vicarious human life, uniting us and identifying us with this new humanity' (see Van Der Zee 2004, p. 51). It is Christ himself who is the agent, immersing us into the newness of life – 'that life of communion which were created in the image of the triune God to be co-lovers [*condiligentes*]' (Torrance 1996, p. 68). As Calvin (see Cottrell 2022; [*author's added emphasis*]) comments on Colossians 2:2:

> By *baptism* we are buried with Christ because Christ does *at the same time* accomplish *efficaciously* that mortification, which he there represents, that the reality may be *conjoined* with the sign. (pp. 68–69)

In our era, which shows a certain openness to *mystery* (even the natural sciences *par excellence*), it is necessary to translate our view of baptism in the grammar of Calvin's *biblical* insights. The *disjunction* that Article 34 confesses between the minister's *outward* actions and what the Lord does *inwardly* within believers is a case in point. Galatians 3:27 and Romans

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201. It appears as if Article 34 could not take the step – with Calvin – towards that decisive stage, namely of being 'engrafted' into Christ, which is effectuated by baptism. It thus omits the *unio mystica* with Christ. It veers on the edge of Zwingli's *diastasis* between sign and signified. Indeed, Zwingli, quoted by Cottrell (2022, p. 57; [*author's added emphasis*]) says: 'So I am brought to see that a sacrament is *nothing else* than an initiatory ceremony or pledging. For just as those who were about to enter upon litigation deposited a certain amount of money, which could not be taken away except by the winner, so those who are initiated by sacraments bind and pledge themselves and, as it were, seal a contract not to draw back […]'.

6:4 – cited underneath the article – seemingly does not support this.[202] The first text affirms that anyone who has been baptised into 'Christ has put on Christ' [*eis Christon ebaptisthéte endusasthe Christon*] (Calvin 2020, commenting on Gl 3:27; [*author's added emphasis*]):

> With strict propriety, then, does Paul, in addressing the believers, say that *when they were baptized*, they 'put on Christ', just as in the Epistle to the Romans (v. 4) he says: that we *have been planted together* into his death (by baptism) so as to be also *partakers* of his resurrection. (p. 18)[203]

If 'baptism is Christian doctrine taught by symbolic action', as Vanhoozer (2019, p. 188) rightly avers, then there is another aspect of baptism that calls out to be highlighted in our times. Berkouwer (1954, p. 124; emphasis added) articulates this dimension concisely: 'Baptism was *instituted* by Christ as baptism of his *kingdom*'. The *deepest joy* in this facet of the grace which he bestows through the symbolic action in the sacrament is surely that of our *compassionate Father* himself ('Your gracious Father is pleased to give you the kingdom', Lk 12:32). In the baptismal prayer of our Reformed Formulary, the Father is petitioned that the baptised person should denounce 'the devil and his whole kingdom' (or *'pompa'*, as in the original version). In an interesting investigation, the Dutch theologian Trimp (1983, pp. 199–205; Kruger 2015, p. 4; see also Leithart 2021, p. 40) shows that the word [*pompa*] is derived from the custom of an ancient Roman theatrical parade, called *pompa circenses*. It had a religious meaning. Images of Roman gods were carried in the parade. The entourage was formed by a motley show of costumed participators like clowns and music-makers, cajoling in the streets as entourage. A crowd usually gathered in order to follow this carnivalesque procession to the *Circus Maximus*, where games with gladiators and wild animals were due to commence. Such is the *pompa* of the world from which baptism severs Christians. (pp. 199–205)

Like Paul (1 Cor 4:9, 10), they have been made members of *another* kingdom, which is not a matter of chatter but of dynamic power [*dunamis*] (1 Cor 4:20), and as such must be willing to act out the roles of fools for Christ in a 'spectacle' [*theatron*] before men and angels. Being made one with Christ through baptism, Christians are not their own and therefore

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202. Within the confines of this inquiry, we naturally make a choice.

203. Calvin elucidates how St. Paul does not leave any doubt about the fact that 'what belongs to him [Christ] is communicated to us' by baptism. He explains that with the metaphor of a garment. St Paul intimates that the persons who are baptised 'are so closely united to him [Christ], that in the presence of God, they bear the name and character of Christ and are viewed in him rather than in themselves' (Calvin 2020, p. 18, on Gl 3:27).

should be 'followers' [*mimétes*] of Paul as he himself is 'mimicking' Christ, the crucified God, the exalted King of this kingdom (1 Cor 11:1; 2:8).[204]

In short, our baptismal entry into God's kingdom drama in no way should be misunderstood as a 'ticket' to worldly glory. We have been drawn into a *cruciform life with him* who 'in his *cross as in a splendid theatre*' displayed 'the incomparable goodness of God […] before the whole world' (Calvin, commenting on Jn 13:31; see quote in Lane 2011, p. 73; [*author's added emphasis*]).

We will urgently have to disentangle ourselves from the 'tamed' bourgeois, Constantinian-era smugness that frequently still surrounds our Reformed theologising on and practising of baptism (see Leithart 2021, pp. 36, 42). This essay contends that a more 'theodramatic' approach even to baptism might jolt us out of our rather cosy conventions. It might again – paradoxically – *fill* us with the *emptiness* of those who *seek* their whole fullness of humanity by living, through the Spirit, their baptismal sharing in Christ's perfect humanity. Consider the following section.

Infant baptism: The strong case for infant baptism that Article 34 makes – by invoking the unity between the Old and the New Covenants (only a difference in administrations) and thus accepting the applicability of the same promises to both – might be reinforced along dramatic lines in today's winner-takes-all world of inhuman competitiveness. This, however, entails that the 'covenant context of the [kingdom] drama' should be clearly profiled (see Moes 2022, p. 76, on Horton's perspective). In this way, the drama can be seen as having 'powerful props', including baptism. Such props become means by which we (*also infants*) are 'no longer spectators but are actually included in the [kingdom drama's] cast' (see Horton 2011, p. 19). The entrance by baptism into this covenantal-framed drama can only be made *once*,[205] but it is a sure pledge from God's side that God will sustain the baptised Christian's kingdom role in communion with Christ *throughout life*. An answer is expected from the baptised, however. Even the infant-baptised should respond, through the Holy Spirit, in faith – as soon as possible. Yet in this regard also, baptism is a pledge that Christ is the 'Amen' as he is the 'Yes' to all God's promises (2 Cor 1:20–21). Truly, all is from grace (Torrance 1996; [*author's added emphasis*]):

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204. Around the 1st century, mime actors were especially disreputable. Under the metaphor of such disgraceful 'low-born' clowns, 'mere nothings' on the stages of this world (1 Cor 1:28), baptised Christians were mocked as mimickers of the apostle, and the apostle himself as if he were the 'chief fool' (Welburn 2005, pp. 61, 243).

205. The Anabaptists of the 16th century have a multi-faceted heritage *today*. Against all those Christians who believe in 'baptism again', we testify in love but firmness for true baptism as happening only once.

Our response in faith and obedience is *a response to the Response* already made by Christ to the Father's love, a response we are summoned to *make in union with Christ*. (p. 43)

■ The Lord's Supper (Art. 35)

Retrieving a pilgrim's 'foretaste' in the eucharistic banquet: The sacraments' function of providing 'wings' to strengthen the weak and weary is 'in an especially vivid way' exhibited in the Lord's Supper (see Zachman 2009, p. 367; also Gerrish 1992, p. 92). The invisible one, holy, catholic, apostolic church 'becomes visible, especially at the Lord's Supper [...] the essence of being church is sacramentally enclosed' therein (see Spoelstra 1989, pp. 190, 191). In Article 35, the Supper is called a *spiritual banquet*, meaning an instituted meal of *embodied* believers celebrated through the *Holy Spirit*, where the Lord feeds their hungry and thirsty hearts abundantly. We also confess that this banquet is to be accompanied by *thanksgiving* [Greek: *eucharistia*] – not only in words and song but also in growing deeds of love towards our neighbours and even our enemies (see Hb 13:15–16). The Lord's Supper is thus taken up into the *rhythm of seed*, being strewn out on the mountains and then gathered again in the communion of the saints at the liturgical sacred meal (see Pretorius 1980, p. 21, for this beautiful imagery used by one of the earliest recorded Christian eucharistic prayers – in the *Didaché* ca. 100 AD). The inflow of sacramental power flows out into the world and back again, week after week, into liturgical replenishment. This sacrament should *frequently* happen '[...] until he [the Lord] comes'. It is indeed a 'proleptic' event, a 'microcosm of the way things really ought to be' (Leithart 2000, p. 163). On our pilgrims' way to the Final Act of the kingdom drama, these sacramental enactments are like 'dress rehearsals' (see Norris 1999, p. 94), exuberant 'preludes', surrounded by the *Maranathas* of deep longing (see also Belgic Confession Art. 37).

Our re-emphasis in this essay, however, is on the core action of joyful exchange in the Supper, as stated so forcefully in the Belgic Confession. Firstly, it should be retrieved from its conventional neglect. Secondly, attention should be given to a concomitant peculiarity of the Calvinian view: Christ's remaining at the Father's right hand. The question, finally, whether our conventional mode of self-examination before the Supper does not minimise the deep joy inherent in the wonderful exchange that we will profile.

The mystical union in this sacramental happening: The Belgic Confession echoes Calvin's peculiar accent on the sacrament as real *bestowal* of the *unio mystica, joyful exchange* or *wonderful commutation* which it signifies, pledges and illustrates through the actions performed with bread and wine.

This eucharistic peculiarity is like a prism through which Calvin's whole theology radiates (see Van't Spijker 1995, pp. 59–60; also Horton 2010, p. 382). It is especially reflected in the Confession's assertion that 'we receive in our souls the true body and true blood of Christ' [*in animis nostris recipere verum corpus et verum sanguinem Christi*]. As we take, eat and drink the bread and wine at the Eucharist, we take, eat, drink and absorb the true body and true life-giving blood of Christ. However, we do those actions in the power of the Holy Spirit by means of the hand and mouth of faith. A more Calvinian view can hardly be found. '*Everything that belongs to Christ, he shares with us*', having taken us up into his own body, and becoming one with us. 'So, we take our life out of his flesh and blood, so that it [his flesh and blood] is not unjustly called our food' (Calvin, writing to Vermigli, see Schwarz 1962, p. 794).

In relation, however, to *the first few sentences of* Article 35, it is open to serious questioning 'that the Reformed Church disowned Zwinglianism', as Gerrish (1992, p. 96) surmises (see also above on baptism). As Wandel (2006, p. 197) argues, Article 35 makes a 'division that Calvin did not make': it understands the elect and thus regenerated people to have *a twofold life* in themselves, one bodily [*corporalem*] and temporary [*temporariam*], and the other spiritual [*spiritualis*] and celestial [*coelestis*]. Wandel (2006, p. 197) notes that the concept of 'signs' in the Belgic Confession are *not* 'located within a process of deepening faith and discernment', involving the spiritual and the material 'lives' of Christians; they 'quicken' only the celestial life but *not* with it the earthly life of a believer. Thus, the whole *person* of the believer does not grow through the Holy Spirit towards the *resurrection of the body*. Contrariwise, Calvin maintains that the mind, as image of God (in Calvin's view), begins *now* to receive the 'quickening Spirit of Christ' and *verum corpus* to become conscious of the glory of God; the body as 'member of Christ' receives (now already something of) *the quickening of our very flesh in which Christ abides* (see Miles 2008, p. 294, quoting Calvin 1962a, p. 164; *Inst*. I.15.4, 1962b, p. 268; *Inst*. III.25.7; [*author's added emphasis*]).

Apart from this residue[206] of Zwingli's 'spiritualistic' anthropology in the approach to the Lord's Supper, we cannot agree with Wandel (see previous paragraph) that Article 35 has a Zwinglian view of signs. It explicitly

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206. The distinction between the *inward* and the *outward man* in 2 Corinthians 5:16 does not coincide with *nonmaterial* and *material*. The outward man, comments Calvin in this verse, is not to be restricted entirely to the body. 'It is a mistake, for the Apostle intended to comprehend, under this term, everything that relates to the present life'. One can thus compare the 'decaying' of the 'outward man' with the 'passing of the present age' in 1 Corinthians 7:31, of which Calvin comments that it is probably an allusion to a 'theatrical presentation', as if the curtain for a new act is suddenly raised and, 'in a single moment', the scene changes to an astonishing new performance with new décor and new costumes. It is not a question of material–immaterial but of visible present–hidden future.

confesses that although we do not understand the hidden activity of the Holy Spirit, God 'works [*efficit*] in us all that he represents [*repraesentat*] to us by these holy signs'. Although the Lord's Supper was for Zwingli 'not merely a memorial meal', as Bavinck (2008, p. 129) correctly interprets him, the heavy emphasis that he placed on the memorial aspect cannot be denied. In Article 35, the Zwinglian accent is so far superseded by the Calvinian emphasis on the *verum corpus* of Christ – as *the* deepest 'substance' of the Supper – that the notion of a *memorial* (which, of course, is a true biblical aspect which should be highly honoured, as Trimp 1985, pp. 80–82 contends) is only mentioned once. Contrariwise, that Zwinglian hallmark of remembering Christ's passion and death for us *in the past*,[207] inordinately dominates our Reformed Palatinate Formulary for the Lord's Supper.

In summary, with Billings (2018, p. 215), one can conclude that the restriction of 'remembrance' to a mere 'mental recollection' lies at the heart of the conundrum that *present-day* Reformed eucharistic theology experiences. Boldly *refocusing* on the full mystical union, the *mirifica commutatio* between Christ and us, as Article 35 highlights it, might go a far way in redressing the balance. *In* the reciprocal symbolically *enacted*, dramatised *happening* between Christ's giving the material elements in grace (through the hands of the minister) and our receiving them in faith, the *real happening* of our sin-filled hands being emptied through the Spirit into his hands and his grace-filled real body and blood being immersed in us, through the same Spirit, occurs.

Christ remaining at the Father's right hand: A neuralgic point in Reformation times was the *location* of our Lord Jesus Christ's glorified human nature after his ascension. Without discussing the complex issues surrounding the Lutheran and Roman Catholic views on this issue, we would restrict our comments here to the famous 'extra-Calvinistic' perspective. This is also the line followed in Article 35. It confesses that Christ communicates [*communicat*] himself through faith at the Supper, although he always [*perpetuo*] sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven. This conviction resonates in one of the most characteristic actions of the Reformed Supper liturgy: the age-old exhortation, *sursum corda* [the hearts upwards!]. Here again, the Christological 'who question' should guide us. It sometimes seems as if the Belgic Confession's Calvinian view leans towards Nestorianism (separating the human and divine natures in the Mediator; see Gerrish 1993, p. 54). Yet the *mystery* of the personal union of the two

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207. 'What was important for Zwingli was what happened in the past, namely on the cross, which we now remember in faith and fellowship; for Calvin it was not only what happened then, but what was central was what happened here *and now* in the breaking and receiving of the bread' (De Gruchy 2013, p. 5; [*emphasis in the original*]).

natures in a Chalcedonian sense is maintained (the four great paradoxes of Chalcedon only circumscribe, but do not solve, that mystery). For Calvin and us, the *new humanity* of Christ cannot be dissolved; our humanity is *in* his humanity (the joyful exchange), distinguished but not separated from his deity and thus from the triune God. It is of the utmost consequence that we *already* share with Christ our new humanity, which will be ours in *fullness* at the marriage feast of the Lamb in the grand finale of God's kingdom drama. Rightly, Torrance (1996, p. 28) judges that 'perhaps we are never more human' than at the Holy Communion.

After the post-Galileo and post-Einstein paradigm-shifts, the Calvinian insistence on the 'geographical' distancing between communicants at the Meal and Christ's humanity in heaven today becomes problematic. According to Oberman (1988, p. 20), however, the '*sursum corda*' relates to the *arcana operatio* [hidden working] of God. It thus means: 'lift up your hearts to the hidden source of strength, the throne of God'. When Christ, as to his humanity, sits at the right hand of the Father, he is *within* that *hidden* source of strength, beyond our every comprehension (see Kaiser 2003, pp. 250–251). Remarkably, Christ indeed has the power to give us a share in his real body and blood by letting the *hidden* strength [*arcanam virtutem*] *directly* flow to us from his hidden fullness at the right hand of the Father. His wise way, however, is to let the Holy Spirit use *material*, unglamorously visible, everyday means to that end. 'Eating bread [and drinking wine] shows more clearly both our own weakness and the power of God's grace' (Gerrish 1993, p. 74).

Self-examination before the Lord's Supper: It is well known what a prominent place in the whole pastoral and church-orderly life of Reformed churches is occupied by the self-examination of believers and the linked *sensura morum* procedure before the (infrequent) celebrations of the Lord's Supper. In Article 35 of the Belgic Confession, surprisingly, only one sentence is dedicated to this requirement: 'Nobody may sit at this table who had not previously examined [*probaverit*] himself [or herself] rightly'. Then, in the same sentence, the warning is added that – without such self-censure – one could eat and drink a judgement on oneself.[208] These words must be understood as an exhortation to '*evangelical repentance*' (meaning: 'repentance is not the cause of the forgiveness of sins'). Calvin strongly advocated this understanding over against the 'scholastic

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208. With good reason, Pannenberg (1986, p. 37), some time ago already, pointed out that a distorted understanding of penitence wreaked havoc in the traditional Protestant exegesis of Paul's words on the unworthy partaking of the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:27–31). The self-examination that Paul is talking about relates to the question of whether co-communicants as co-members of the body of Christ fully appreciate each other's social and economic situation and not only that of themselves (especially directed to rich and higher-class members: 'wait for each other'). It does not imply 'that one has to be in an irreproachable moral position when one receives the sacrament'.

doctrine of penance' – which he calls '*legal repentance*' (Calvin 1962a, pp. 311–512, 533; *Inst*. III.4.3 and III.4.4; see Torrance 1996, pp. 44–46; see also Pannenberg 1986, p. 22, versus an orthodox-minded Protestant 'strategy of creating neurotic guilty feelings'). The latter form of repentance requires that grave and sometimes gruelling actions of *repentance should precede* the renewed gracious response of the Father towards his child – and, therefore, a renewed welcome at the Father's banquet. This, however, frequently brings about that our conscience can have *no rest* at all, no peace with God, no confidence or security, 'but is continually trembling, fluctuating, boiling, and distracted; it *dreads, hates and shuns the presence of God*' (Calvin 1962a, p. 536; *Inst*. III.4.2; author's own added emphasis). This form of repentance was – according to Torrance (2014, p. 144) – 'prevalent in the scholastic Calvinism that distorted and misappropriated Calvin's theology […]'. The emphasis gradually tended to gravitate away from the promises of God (not least the visible promises effecting, through faith and not through repentance, the mystical union with Christ in the Eucharist). Penitence gradually became a reflection on the believer's own feelings, conjuring up a 'quicksand of subjectivism and endless introspection' (Van den Brink & Van der Kooi 2013, p. 624).

Rightly, Article 35 confesses that all who take part in Holy Communion should first examine themselves.[209] The aim is, however, *not* to ascertain *whether one should exclude oneself* or not (as especially strict, even fundamentalistically strict, Reformed believers sometimes do). Paul says that everyone should examine themselves '*and so*' [*kai houtoos*] participate – *not if* they are worthy to participate (1 Cor 11:28; see Van de Beek 2008, pp. 386–387). Of course, the 'communion of the saints' requires that we should be each other's pastors and that there surely remains a cybernetical (managing) service for leaders. Yet focusing or refocusing on evangelical repentance is vital. The meeting of the father with his returning son in Jesus' story of the prodigal son (Lk 15;19–20) is a parabolic pointer to that form of self-examination that truly *enhances the*

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209. The question of *if* this self-examination implies that *baptised children* should be excluded from the Lord's Supper because of their ignorance of what is happening there has recently become topical – also in Reformed sacramentology (see Moore-Keish 2008, pp. 134–137). We cannot here enter deeply into that discussion (see Van Wyk 2015, pp. 330–340, who gives a thorough treatment of – including a convincing plea for – *children's Supper-participation* [that is, 'for those who can already understand what is going on in the Supper']). The latter qualification, however, raises the question of that 'understanding's *nature*'. Is it an *intellectual* – albeit simple – grasping or an inchoate intuition of the Father's goodness in providing *his* food and drink to nourish his children – received in the bosom of a (covenantal) church family? With these embodied actions, could the Holy Spirit not 'touch' *very small*, *baptised toddlers* already on a 'pre-cognitive level' – with a 'knowledge' of love? (See Smith 2013, pp. 10–21 for an illuminating discourse on this point.) For that matter, Reformed practice always widely insisted that small children – *even infants* – should not be withheld from the preaching of the Word, although they could not intellectually grasp it (preaching is indeed the *first* of the means of grace – an *audible* sacrament; see also Billings 2018, pp. 258–262).

joy in the eucharistic prelude to the Lamb's marriage feast. It is not the son's pleading and penitent arms which move the Father to embrace him but the *father's free grace expressed in his own embrace*, which evokes the son's embrace of responsive love in deep thankfulness or *eucharistia* (see Torrance 1996, p. 57).

In summary, *evangelical* repentance before the Lord's Supper entails a deep faith meditation on our *own* coram Deo *life* (life before the face of the living triune God), especially in the awareness that *the Doctor* (Jesus Christ) has *come to heal the sick* – not the healthy. In light of the gospel, we must realise again, in the depths of our being through the Holy Spirit, that *the innocent Doctor has become the patient* who had absorbed all peoples' abysmal wounds of sin and eternal death into himself. Our wounds have become his wounds through a wonderful commutation. Self-examination is feeling with deep shame, in faith, his wounds as our wounds, 'and so' [*kai houtoos*] seeking again and again (because we always need it) *healing*, through our absorbing, in faith, *his broken, wounded life-giving flesh and blood* in the signs that effect it – the dramatic taking, eating and drinking of bread and wine.

◼ Conclusion

Our research into Articles 33–35 of the Belgic Confession, through the lens of 're-emphasising' sacramental 'joyful exchange' in the ecclesial happenings of baptism and the Lord's Supper, attempted to contribute to a 'widening of the (sacramental) wings', that is, restoring the balance in the sacraments' exhibiting enactments (or recalibrating the conventional Reformed overstressing of the *memorial enactment*). We did this in the confidence that the Holy Spirit wills to use the *full* spectrum of these sacramental means he has given to help the weak, weary and sinful to soar as high as possible on 'eagle's wings' – not merely to walk or run (see Is 40: 29–31). This entailed:

- reaffirming *ecclesia reformanda* – not changing or denigrating the Confession
- reinforcing the 'happening (eventful) dynamic' of the two ecclesial sacraments by reframing them into dramatic enactments of the triune God's unfolding kingdom across historical paradigm shifts
- reorienting the ecclesial sacraments in relation to the wider sacramentality of the whole cosmos
- reaffirming the Calvinian accent that the sign and the signified are not to be separated but distinguished
- re-awaiting, through the Holy Spirit, the gift of *full* eschatological humanness towards which we as pilgrims are growing through the help of this preludial sacramental commutation with the last Adam.

Belgic Confession Article 36: On those who are in and under authority in this life: Citizens obeying the civil rulers obeying God

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■ The most significant article within the Belgic Confession?

It may be argued that the Belgic Confession reached its intended, methodologically crafted climax with Article 36 and 37 (cf. Muller 2010, pp. 63, 72). When the confession is used in general circumstances today, these articles most probably do not deserve such a label and are not being taken as the most significant in the confession. Some would even find the wording approved by the Synod of Dort unchristian or at least embarrassing in the current postmodern era.

Yet these articles, especially Article 36, certainly deserved this label in the context within which, as indicated in Chapter 1 in this book, Guido de Brès utilised this confession in pleading for his congregation, arguing that they have been falsely accused and persecuted wrongfully. Far from being revolutionary Anabaptists trying to upend the centuries-old *corpus christianum*, they were in fact obedient citizens, only striving towards serving God according to his written Word (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 7). It is also in this vein that he stated in Article 36 *what* God, who is acknowledged as the One from whom all authority in this world stems, expects from those under as well as those in authority. Apart from having a responsibility towards the good order in the state in general, De Brès also articulated the responsibility that those in authority have concerning the true Christian belief, as had it been identified in the preceding Articles (Belgic Confession Art. 1–35).

Incidentally, this focused nature of Article 36 contributed to the fact that many churches have since then felt the need to change some of the phrases – especially when the governmental systems they had to deal with evolved. Because of these changes, Article 36 has in time become the most varied article of the Belgic Confession. These changes are, however, also connected to the underlying theology, fundamental worldview(ish) beliefs and their view of the status of the historic confession.

◼ Introduction to the chapter arrangement

Even though Article 36 might not be regarded as the most significant article of the Belgic Confession in the current circumstances, the article still shines the light of the gospel on the current political and connected turmoil in the world, where it is dearly needed. This chapter will therefore aim to explicate God's calling towards those in and those under authority, as formulated within Article 36.

In order to address this, a short summary will be given concerning the theological, religious and political background relevant to Article 36. The text of the article will be analysed while taking the changes into account that have been made prior to and especially since the 1618–1619 Synod of Dort. An overview of the different versions that churches use today will therefore also be provided.

Following this, the most significant aspects of the content of the article will be highlighted in order to be able to say what is being confessed concerning God's calling towards those in and under civil authority and how these are related. Throughout this discussion, attention will also be paid to applicable instances of the relevance of Article 36 to current issues.

This chapter will conclude by summarising the consequences of all of the above for the current situation: What are the God-given responsibilities – also within a religious context that has changed vastly since the 16th century – of those in authority? With which means should those in authority fulfil their God-given responsibilities? What are the God-given responsibilities of those under God-given authority? Within which borders should these responsibilities be fulfilled? Do those under authority, for example, have the right to resist those who have authority over them?

■ Statements on the religious and political background of Article 36

It has been asked whether an article such as Article 36 even belongs in a confession and if this does not represent an overreach by the church.[210] At this point, it must, however, be kept in mind that it is part and parcel of the nature of a confession to be a response from God's Word (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 2 to 7) to a certain issue or situation. If there is one article in the Belgic Confession which is to be understood as an attempt at a valid response within a certain situation and to certain issues, it is Article 36.

While the circumstances within which and the issues to which De Brès responded have been discussed extensively in Chapter 1, some aspects should be emphasised at this point:

- De Brès aimed to formulate his shared Reformed faith in such a way that the distinction from the Roman Catholics' beliefs, and especially from those of the Anabaptists, would be clear.
- In contrast to what many people experience today, the Reformers had very little contact with 'the state' as abstract concept. Their contact was with persons in authority. As has been articulated by Hartvelt (1991, p. 334), on Sunday mornings, the state was sitting in church. Even appointed officials had loyalty to the person that appointed them rather than to a vast abstract machinery. This 'personal' aspect needs to be kept in mind when interpreting Article 36.
- De Brès formulated the confession when the inhabitants of the low countries started their struggle for political (and religious) freedom and when Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists were mostly united in this struggle. However, at the time when the confession was accepted

210. See the discussion by Van Bruggen (1980, p. 186) of the views of K Dijk and SG de Graaf, who felt that Article 36 represents an overreach by the church. The more one would support a public–private distinction concerning religion, the more likely one is to support such a claim of overreach today. Fourie (2006, p. 170), for example, believes that the confession should be read as an interesting historical document and left there. At this point, it is worth noting how someone like Allan Jensen (2016) titled his recent book *Confessing the faith today*.

60 years later at the Synod of Dort, political independence was practically assured. The political power was in the hands of the Calvinists, who ensured that a situation, as envisioned by the late William of Orange, wherein competing religious groups would all be equal before the law could never materialise. Calvinism had, in practice (also due to political reasons), become the state religion. By this time, 'Belgium' had also long been lost to the Roman Catholic cause.

- During the Reformation, the Netherlands were also part of a broader momentum in Europe which was transitioning from a *corpus christianum* [akin to religious state] to a dispensation where the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* [state religion] legally applied. At the time when the Belgic Confession was formulated, the Roman Catholic Church still tried to uphold the *corpus christianum* as a 'religious state' within which the church dominated. Yet by the time the confession was finally accepted, the Netherlands had effectively become a state with its own religion. Now, the state, rather than the church, was in control. Note that the Reformed Church only formally became the state church in 1816.

- While Rome saw limited value in civil (secular) life, Luther (as well as Calvin) recognised its intrinsic value. Persons with civil authority (and not only those with ecclesiastical authority) thus also came to be seen as co-workers in the kingdom of God.[211]

- Religious differences often led to violent conflict. Since both the Roman Catholics and the Protestants viewed themselves as the true embodiment of the true Christian church (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 29), all parties (excluding the Anabaptists) demanded protection from those in authority, who were also seen, by both Catholics and Protestants (excluding the Anabaptists), as servants of God. This conviction should be kept in mind when interpreting the phrase in Article 36, according to which those in authority have a responsibility towards the eradication of false religion and idolatry – even with violence.[212]

- Calvin was more effective even than Luther in applying the implications of the rediscovered gospel in the civil sphere. This is partly because of his view of the relation of church and state (cf. Van der Walt 2002, pp. 100–107). Luther had all but separated church and state into two adjoining kingdoms (dominions), yet still in a dualistic way. Rome had for centuries viewed the church (in a dualistic way) as '*above*' the state and civil life – the holy above the secular, needing to bring it to fulfilment.

211. While both Luther and Calvin most probably never used the term 'co-workers' in this instance themselves, and while it may indeed be regarded as stated in terms of 20th century theology, this term is meant in terms of the analysis of Van der Walt (2002, pp. 100–107), which is treated later in this chapter. Also, see Muller (2010, pp. 69, 331, 343).

212. Compare Article 36, Paragraph 3.

While Luther held that the state and civil life should rather be seen as '*next to*' the church; and while the Anabaptists also believed the church and state were '*next to, yet opposed*' *to* each other; Calvin saw the church as *in* but *not of* this word (cf. Van der Walt 2002, pp. 100–107). This view of Calvin's stemmed from his anthropology, wherein he distinguished between a person's internal and external life (cf. Rm 2:28–29). Calvin incidentally also blamed the Roman Catholics for failing to recognise this distinction within every human's existence and therefore also the accompanying distinction between the church and the world. It was because the Roman Catholics failed to make this distinction that they, according to Calvin, believed mistakenly that they could use worldly (civil) means (including force) to effect spiritual, inward change (including causing belief).

- In contrast with Rome, the Protestants acknowledged that an individual's conscience is out of reach [German: *unantastbar*] to human means. While such a person's (external) actions may therefore be regulated – even with force, coercion or violence – it was impossible to regulate anyone's (inner) faith. In this sense, the Reformation did much to break the control that the Roman Catholic hierarchy tried to exercise over everyone's conscience and life in general.

- According to the Reformers, the church had to focus on a person's inner life (the seat of faith and convictions) by means of preaching the Word. As co-workers in the kingdom, the civil authorities had to govern people's outward expression of their inner convictions. For Calvin, these civil authorities had the responsibility to ensure that there was a public image of the true religion amongst Christians and mutual courteousness (civility, gentleness, good mannerliness) amongst people in general. If the church rejected the way that some expressed themselves outwardly (in words or actions), it could call on the assistance of those in civil authority. Their support was considered essential for the well-being of the church and society in general. However, providing this support became complicated when there was a difference in what the church expected of the civil government, as Catholics and Protestants at times differed in these matters. In such instances, those in civil authority now, for the first time in centuries, had to ask which church was their co-servant in the kingdom.

- According to the theology of Calvin and other Reformers, civil authorities had to prosecute heretics – even with force – because heretics undermined public order in the way that they outwardly expressed their inner convictions. Note that heretics should not be persecuted for their false beliefs as such but for the wrongful actions springing from these beliefs. Those in authority are the custodians of the law. Where the moral law assisted people in loving God, the civil law protected peace

and the above-mentioned courteousness amongst humans in general. Polman (s.a., p. 275), who analyses Calvin's sermons thoroughly, concludes that he distinguished between 'those who knew' and 'those who did not'. There were several instances where Calvin regarded Christians as imputable [German: *zurechenbarkeit*; Afrikaans: *Toerekeningsvatbaar*] while Jewish people and pagans (and even some Roman Catholics) were not. Calvin's view can be likened to the covenantal concept according to which the punishment of those who broke the covenant is more severe than of those who have never been part of it.[213] It was therefore not so much idolators in general who had to be punished but those who did so while they knew the gospel. Polman (s.a., p. 278) says that De Brès,[214] in light of his referred-to publication *Le Baston*, agreed with Calvin. Beza defended the execution of Michael Servetus with reference to this principle. Hall (1996, p. 227) indicates that while De Brès believed that Christian princes should, as a last measure, even execute false prophets and heretics, he stressed that their pronouncements should be measured according to Scripture. In this, it should be taken into account whether the meaning of the relevant passages (and consequent dogma) was clear and simple or rather complex and confusing. It should also be taken into account if someone kept their (false and heretical) thoughts mostly to themselves, perhaps asking for assistance, and whether such a person wanted to start their own church.

• De Brès built upon the ideas of Calvin and agreed with him that those in authority had been appointed by God (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 12 on providence) and that they should thus be obeyed (cf. the fifth commandment). These authorities had to, while taking imputability into account as indicated above, help to ensure that people serve God. The authorities may, and at times were required to, use the sword to this end. No one should, however, try to force anyone to believe. This was not only unacceptable but, in fact, also impossible. While Calvin and De Brès in this way escaped the 'Spritualism' [Afrikaans: *Geesdrywery*] and the accompanying Biblicist absolutism of the Anabaptists, they did not always escape what Vonk calls the 'Churchalism' [Afrikaans: *Kerkdrywery*] of which the Roman Catholics were guilty. Vonk (cf. Muller 2010, p. 54) argued convincingly that while Calvin and De Brès shared these convictions, these convictions did not, however, find their way into Article 36.

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213. Also compare Jesus' denouncement of the cities where he had done most of his work (Mt 11:20–24).

214. Also compare De Brès's distinction between the Anabaptist leaders and followers, as explained in Chapter 1.

■ The text of Article 36: Structural analysis and amendments to the text approved in 1619

In order to determine what Article 36 states concerning *to what* God is calling those in and those under authority, one should examine the text.

While acknowledging the fact that Guido de Brès was the primary author of the Belgic Confession, it was the decision taken by the Synod of Dort in 1619 that finally established the high status of the Belgic Confession. It is therefore the Dutch text that this synod approved (*Acta* 1620, pp. 318, 943), rather than the original version that De Brès produced in 1561 that will be used for this analysis. This does not mean that De Brès's text should now be ignored, because according the principles of Reformed hermeneutics, an author's intention is taken into account when determining the meaning of a text.

The text of Article 36 contains only five sentences. Most of the translations (e.g. the English and Afrikaans versions) that were produced decades or even centuries later kept the basic structure but broke up these longer sentences into several shorter ones, organising them into five equivalent paragraphs. To avoid confusion, I will therefore refer to *paragraphs* rather than sentences and will, in doing so, treat the sentences of the 1619 text as paragraphs. Since the analysis will be done on the 1619 text, the significant changes some churches made to the text since 1905 will be discussed later.

The texts[215] approved in 1619 thus read as follows in Table 12.1.

TABLE 12.1: The text of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession.

Paragraph 1	Wij gelooven,
	dat onze **goede God,** […] Koningen, Prinsen en **Overheden** verordend heeft,
	[uit oorzaak der verdorvenheid des menschelijken geslachts,]
	willende, dat de wereld geregeerd worde door wetten en politie;
	opdat de ongebondenheid der menschen bedwongen worde,
	en (opdat) het alles met goede ordondantie onder de menschen toega.
Paragraph 2	Tot dat einde heeft Hij de **Overheid** het zwaard in handen gegeven,
	tot straffe der boozen
	en **bescherming der vromen.**

Table 12.1 continues on the next page →

215. I added the colour and formatted some text in bold in order to highlight certain links.

TABLE 12.1 (cont.): The text of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession.

Paragraph 3	En haar ambt is **niet alleen** acht te nemen en te waken over de politie;
(A1)	**maar ook** de hand te houden aan den heiligen kerkedienst;
	om te weren en uit te roeien alle afgoderij en valschen godsdienst,
(A2)	**om** het rijk des Antichrists te gronde te werpen,
(B2)	**en** het koninkrijk van Jezus Christus te bevorderen,
	het woord des Evangelies overal te doen prediken,
(B1)	**opdat** God van een iegelijk geëerd en gediend worde, gelijk Hij in zijn Woord gebiedt.
Paragraph 4	[van welke kwaliteit, conditie of staat hij zijn,]
	Verder, een ieder, […] is schuldig zich den Overheden
	te onderwerpen,
	schatting te betalen,
	haar eer en eerbied toe te dragen,
	en haar gehoorzaam te zijn
	in alle dingen, die niet strijden tegen Gods Woord,
	voor haar biddende in zijne gebeden,
	<u>opdat</u> de Heere ze bestieren wil in al hare wegen,
	en dat wij een gerust en stil leven leiden in alle Godzaligheid en eerbaarheid.
Paragraph 5	En hierover verwerpen wij
	de Wederdoopers
	en andere oproerige menschen,
	en in het algemeen al degenen,
	die de Overheden en Magistraten verwerpen,
	en de Justitie om willen stooten,
	invoerende de gemeenschap der goederen,
	en verwarren de eerbaarheid, die God onder de menschen gesteld heeft.

◼ **Structural analysis**

Article 36 clearly consists of three units:

- **Paragraphs 1–3** deal with those in authority and their appointment and responsibilities.
- **Paragraph 4** deals with the subjects under authority and their responsibilities.
- **Paragraph 5** provides the assessment of those confessing this article towards those who reject it.

The article contains a number of *paired mental concepts and phrases* which are used, much like the parallelisms found in the Psalms, to complement, create contrast or explain. These figures of style play a significant role in the controversial paragraph and should be taken into account.

Paragraph 1 has '*Koningen, Prinsen en Overheden*' [kings, princes and authorities] as well as '*wetten en politie*' [laws and policies or justice, jurisprudence]. '*Ongebondenheid*' [lawlessness] is juxtaposed with

'that everything may be in *"goede ordonnantie"*' [good order] among human beings. There is even a suggestion of a chiasm that would emphasise the significance of God's will.

In **Paragraph 2** the goal with which the sword has been given, is stated in a contrasting way: '*straffe*' [punish] '*der bozen*' [the evil] and '*bescherming*' [protection] '*der vromen*' [the pious].

Paragraph 3 uses a '*heiligen kerkedienst*' [holy church service] paired with '*politie*' [law, justice, jurisprudence]. Those in authority are called to (also) '*acht te nemen en te waken*' [take care of and watch over] the '*politie*'.

The stylistic techniques used up to this point are now utilised to create a very strong construction. Apart from the fact that the terms *afgoderij* en *valschen godsdienst* [idolatry and false religion] (which should be '*weren*' and '*uit roeien*' [fended off and eradicated]) are paired with each other, the phrase is paired with 'rijk des Antichrists' [dominion of the Antichrist], which should be '*te gronde te werpen*' [thrown to the ground or destroyed]. In a strong contrast to this, the '*koninkrijk van Jezus Christus*' [kingdom of Jesus Christ] should be '*bevorderen*' [promoted or strengthened]. Note how '*woord des Evangelies*' [the Word of the gospel] is combined and used in connection with the kingdom of Jesus Christ. These four phrases – which are encapsulated by 'in so doing' and 'so that' – form a chiastic construction:

- A1: To resist and eradicate all idolatry and false religion
- A2: To destroy the dominion of the Antichrist
- B2: To enhance the kingdom of Jesus Christ
- B1: To have the Word of the gospel preached everywhere.

A1 and A2 are paired together, as well as in contrast to B2 and B1, which are also paired together. The focus is on the centre, on A2 versus B2 – the false ruler and his dominion that should be destroyed versus the true King and his kingdom that should be advanced. All of this is encapsulated by A1 (the false religion and the false service to a false god) versus B1 (the true religion and true service to the true King and his kingdom). There is an even more subtle contrast within A1 and B1: idolatry is juxtaposed with the gospel, and false religion with the Word. Lastly, there is an echo of 'all' (idolatry) and 'all over' (where the Word should be preached).[216]

216. While a confession is first and foremost about its content, and while the structure and word order have a rhetoric function, it is truly sad that so many churches removed or changed the controversial phrases (21 words) in this paragraph and, in this way, lost the powerful, inspiring way in which the content was stated. In light of the insight brought by comparing the Dutch and Latin texts to the original French, it became clear that the wholesale changes needed to be made. This will, however, be dealt with in detail later in this chapter.

Paragraphs 4 and 5 do not contain the same use of internal contrasting and complementing concepts and phrases. Several matters are rather strung together or listed – which has a rhetoric dynamic of its own.

There is, however, a clear echo of Paragraph 1 in Paragraph 4: where Paragraph 1 identified those in authority as 'kings, princes and authorities', Paragraph 4 identifies those under authority as everyone irrespective of their 'capacity [Dutch: *kwaliteit*], rank or class [status]'.

There is also a clear and very strong contrast between Paragraphs 4 and 5, and especially between Paragraph 5 and the rest of the article. It is clear that everything that is stated is said with purpose.

By using contrast so extensively, the difference between the Reformed Christians and the Anabaptists was stated in a clear and forceful way.

◼ Changes to the text: Before and after the Synod of Dort

Some of the changes have already been mentioned – such as the fact that this article originally started out with: 'We finally believe'. At that time, Article 37 started out with: 'We finally also believe'. In this way, it was clear that Articles 36 and 37 are actually combined. They functioned as the combined climax, the final words, in the argument that the Reformed Christians should not be confused with the Anabaptists – in fact, actually not at all. This wording also strengthened the thematic connection between the two articles. Where Article 36 can be seen as an appeal towards earthly, human authorities, Article 37 is an appeal to the heavenly Son of God. Take note of the phrases that are used in Article 37: that the return of Christ to judge will comfort the elect; that their innocence will be clear to everyone, also to those who currently accuse them falsely; and also: 'Then it will become known that their case, which are currently condemned by many judges [Dutch: *magistraten*] and authorities and heretics and ungodly people, actually is the case of the Son of God'. Note the reference to the magistrates and authorities in both Articles 36 and 37. In my view, it is sad and even detrimental that the 'finally' in Article 36 as well as the 'also' in Article 37 have been removed. Vonk (1956, p. 549), who discusses the changes in detail, is convinced that it has been removed because of nitpicking.

It is not possible or necessary to discuss all the changes that has been made throughout the centuries. This section will therefore focus on the most significant changes – especially the changes that were set in motion by the gravamen of 1895.

■ The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands' national synods, Middelburg (1896) and Utrecht (1905)

As indicated, by 1816, the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk [NHK]) had formally become the state church in the Netherlands. This meant that the church, to a large extent, was viewed as a department of the state. The negative effects of this contributed to the schism [*afscheiding*] of 1834, several other schisms and mergers that followed and eventually the birth of the Christian Reformed Church (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken [CGK]). After a period of *doleantie* [expression of deep sadness about the state of the church], another major schism in occurred in 1886, as well as a merger in 1892 whereby sections of the NHK and CGK became the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland [GKN]). In 1896, the national synod of the GKN, seated at Middelburg, accepted a gravamen calling for changes to Paragraph 3 of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession. After several deliberations and deputies that failed to provide an alternative formulation, the synod (seated at Utrecht in 1905) eventually decided to scrap the controversial two phrases, containing 21 words in total:

> [*O*]*m te weren en uit te roeien alle afgoderij en valschen godsdienst, om het rijk des Antichrists te gronde te werpen.* (Art. 36)

A mass of documentation has been produced concerning this over the years. There were now effectively two standard versions of Article 36, one with and one without these two phrases. As has been confirmed with the structural analysis, these phrases were a key aspect of the calling of those in authority.

The decision prompted several churches to re-evaluate Article 36 and brought much turmoil within and between churches, which even today still affects the relation between some churches – especially when churches have attempted to unify with each other. Several churches revisited the article, some more than once (cf. the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika [GKSA], who had to deal with the matter for decades before coming to meaningful decision).[217] Some churches followed the GKN and removed the words (cf. the Canadian and American Reformed Churches [CanRC]). Other churches left it unchanged, some of which decided to add explanatory notes and footnotes (the Reformed Church in America [RCA]). There are also churches that decided to reformulate this section of Article 36 (cf. the Christian Reformed Church in North America [CRCNA]). While Paragraph 5 of Article 36 was not the focus in the 1896 gravamen, some churches have decided to remove it (CRCNA) and others to add an explanatory footnote (RCA).

217. The applicable references can also be found in Muller (2020).

The effect of the disjunct way in which this issue was handled within the churches that subscribe to the Belgic Confession is that there are currently several versions of Article 36 – akin to the situation in 1611.

Four versions are provided below as examples indicating the differences. Note that the differences did not only arise from how the issues stemming from Paragraphs 3 and 5 were handled. Some differences are a result of translation and changes that inevitably had to be made to the word order. There are, however, also changes to the word order that seem merely preferential. These changes to the word order may seem innocent yet become more significant in light of the finely tuned way in which De Brès structured the article. A change in word order often leads to a change in emphasis and eventually a change in meaning. The four versions below are from the RCA, the CRCNA, the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA) and the CanRC. The texts from these four churches have been selected for two reasons: firstly, all of them are English texts and, therefore, simpler to work with in a book that is written in English; secondly, they have also been selected because they represent the different options that were taken well by the churches. Some of the most significant changes will be highlighted below. These remarks will, however, not be directed at the churches as such but at the changes to highlight the difference. These remarks do not constitute an assessment of the changes or the choices that the churches made at all.

TABLE 12.2: Four versions of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession.

Article 36 – RCA[218]	Article 36 – CRCNA[219]	Article 36 – PRCA[220]	Article 36 – CanRC[221]
We believe that because of the depravity of the human race, our good God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers. God 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	We believe that because of the depravity of the human race, our good God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers. God 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.	We believe that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, hath appointed kings, princes and magistrates, willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies, to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency	We believe that, because of the depravity of humankind, our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers. He wants the world to be governed by laws and statutes in order that the lawlessness of men be restrained and that everything be conducted among them in good order.

Table 12.2 continues on the next page →

218. RCA: https://www.rca.org/about/theology/creeds-and-confessions/the-belgic-confession/#article36.

219. CRC: https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession#toc-article-36-the-civil-government.

220. PRCA: http://www.prca.org/about/official-standards/creeds/three-forms-of-unity/belgic-confession.

221. CANRC: https://canrc.org/the-belgic-confession#article-36.

TABLE 12.2 (cont.): Four versions of Article 36 in the Belgic Confession are provided as examples indicating the differences.

Article 36 – RCA[218]	Article 36 – CRCNA[219]	Article 36 – PRCA[220]	Article 36 – CanRC[221]
For that purpose, God has placed the sword in the hands of the government, to punish evil people and protect the good	For that purpose, God has placed the sword in the hands of the government, to punish evil people and protect the good	For this purpose, he hath invested the magistracy with the sword, for the punishment of evildoers, and for the protection of them that do well	For that purpose, he has placed the sword in the hand of the government to punish wrongdoers and to protect those who do what is good (Rom 13:4)
And the government's task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but also extends 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 honoured and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word	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.	And their office is, not only to have regard unto, and watch for the welfare of the civil state; but also that they protect the sacred ministry; and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship (see footnote); that the kingdom of Antichrist may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted. They must therefore countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honoured and worshipped by every one, as He Commanded in His Word.	Their task of restraining and sustaining is not limited to the public order but includes the protection of the church and its ministry in order that *the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honoured and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word
Moreover everyone, regardless of status, condition, or rank, must be subject to the government, and pay taxes, and hold its representatives in honour 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	Moreover everyone, regardless of status, condition, or rank, must be subject to the government, pay taxes, and hold its representatives in honour 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	Moreover, it is the bounden duty of everyone, of what state, quality, or condition so ever he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates; to pay tribute, to show due honour and respect to them, and to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God; to supplicate for them in their prayers, that God may rule and guide them in all their ways, and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty	Moreover, everyone – no matter of what quality, condition, or rank – ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God. We ought to pray for them, that God may direct them in all their ways and that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way (1 Tim 2:1, 2).

TABLE 12.2 (cont.): Four versions of Article 36 in the Belgic Confession are provided as examples indicating the differences.

Article 36 – RCA[218]	Article 36 – CRCNA[219]	Article 36 – PRCA[220]	Article 36 – CanRC[221]
And on this matter, we reject the Anabaptists, 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	(And on this matter we reject the Anabaptists, 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)	Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people and, in general, all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates, and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order, which God hath established among men	For that reason we condemn the Anabaptists and other rebellious people and, in general, all those who reject the authorities and civil officers, subvert justice, introduce a communion of goods, and overturn the decency that God has established among men
The RCA included this footnote[222] for Paragraph 3 The RCA included the footnote[223] for Paragraph 5	The CRC included this footnote[224] for Paragraph 3 The CRC included this footnote[225] to Paragraph 5. The paragraph was subsequently removed from the main text and placed in a footnote.	The text that the PRCA provided for in Paragraph 3, is provided in a footnote on this page	The text of the CanRC includes six footnoted references to biblical texts as well as an asterisk[226]

Key: RCA, Reformed Church in America; CRCNA, Christian Reformed Church in North America; PRCA, Protestant Reformed Churches in America; CanRC, Canadian and American Reformed Churches; CRC, Christian Reformed Church.
*Expansion on the *communication idiomatum*.

The United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), which uses the same text as the CRCNA (except e.g. at times referring to 'he' where the CRCNA refers to 'God'), added a footnote (as displayed below[227]) to Paragraph 3.

222. RCA: 'The Reformed Church in America retains the original full text, choosing to recognise that the confession was written within a historical context which may not accurately describe the situation that pertains today'.

223. RCA: 'The RCA retains this final paragraph of the original Article 36, choosing to recognise that the confession was written within a historical context which may not accurately describe the situation that pertains today'.

224. CRC: 'Synod 1958 of the Christian Reformed Church replaced the paragraph above [this refers to the version of the RCA] with the following three paragraphs [as currently displayed]'.

225. CRC: 'Synod 1985 of the CRC directed that this paragraph be taken from the body of the text and placed in a footnote'.

226. CANRC: *"The following words were deleted here by the General Synod 1905 of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*): all idolatry and false worship may be removed and prevented, the kingdom of antichrist may be destroyed."

227. 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 also extends 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'.

The PRCA also decided to add an extensive note[228] in Paragraph 3. The following differences should be noted:

☐ Paragraph 1

- The difference in rhetorical impact when starting out with 'our depravity' versus starting out with the grace of God
- 'God that appointed' (which emphasises the particular person in authority) versus 'God that has ordained' (which emphasises the system that was put in place incorporating persons in authority)
- The use of 'civil officers' versus 'magistrates'
- The reference to: 'human lawlessness' versus 'the dissoluteness of men'
- The reference to: 'everything may be conducted in good order amongst humans' versus 'all things carried on among them with good order *and decency*'.

☐ Paragraph 2

- The reference to 'the government' versus 'the magistery'
- The reference to 'evil people' and 'the good' versus 'evildoers' and 'them that do well', where the emphasis falls first on the kind of person and character versus on the person's actions.

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228. The PRCA included the following in note in the paragraph: 'This phrase, touching the office of the magistracy in its relation to the Church, proceeds on the principle of the Established Church, which was first applied by Constantine and afterwards also in many Protestant countries. History, however, does not support the principle of State domination over the Church but rather the separation of Church and State. Moreover, it is contrary to the New Dispensation that authority be vested in the State to reform the Church arbitrarily and to deny the Church the right to independently conduct its own affairs as a distinct territory alongside the State. The New Testament does not subject the Christian Church to the authority of the State that it should be governed and extended by political measures, but to our Lord and King only as an independent territory alongside and altogether independent of the State, that it may be governed and edified by its office-bearers and with spiritual weapons only. Practically all Reformed churches have repudiated the idea of the Established Church and are advocating the autonomy of the churches and personal liberty of conscience in matters pertaining to the service of God. The Christian Reformed Church in America, being in full accord with this view, feels constrained to declare that it does not conceive of the office of the magistracy in this sense, that it be in duty bound to also exercise political authority in the sphere of religion, by establishing and maintaining a State Church, advancing and supporting the same as the only true Church, and to oppose, to persecute and to destroy by means of the sword all the other churches as being false religions; and to also declare that it does positively hold that, within its own secular sphere, the magistracy has a divine duty towards the first table of the Law as well as towards the second; and furthermore that both State and Church as institutions of God and Christ have mutual rights and duties appointed them from on high, and therefore have a very sacred reciprocal obligation to meet through the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and Son. They may not, however, encroach upon each other's territory. The Church has rights of sovereignty in its own sphere as well as the State (Acta. Synod 1910).

☐ Paragraph 3

- Note the differences between: the government (RCA) versus the civil rulers (CRCNA) versus their office (PRCA), which emphasises accountability (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 37) and which should endow the one in office with confidence.
- The most significant differences (not only in the paragraph but concerning the whole article) are the following:

  ❍ The CRCNA has replaced the paragraph with a new yet more extensive version. (It is quite common that when a confessional tenet needs rewording, it will become more explicit rather than briefer.) It has also included an explanatory note.

  ❍ The CanRC made some changes, leaving it with a shortened paragraph in which, most significantly, the controversial phrases have been omitted in accordance with the 1905 decision of the GKN. It has also included an explanatory note.

  ❍ Both the RCA and the PRCA have included explanatory notes. The note of the PRCA is extensive. More importantly, both the RCA and the PRCA kept the controversial phrases, adding only a pivotal word or two.

  ❍ While the RCA and PRCA use different wording, both clearly followed the French text (which uses '*pour*'), rather than the Dutch text (which has '*om te*') at this point. Take note of the RCA's wording, 'with a view to', and the PRCA's wording, 'thus', to reflect the use of '*pour*' in the French text.

  ❍ While '*om te*' [to] is ambiguous, the use of '*pour*' makes it clear that the two controversial phrases did in fact not point to extra tasks of the government but to the goals with which they should fulfil their task, office or calling which has just been stated. In fact, all four of those phrases explicated the goals with which those in authority (as co-servants in the kingdom) had to fulfil their calling or execute their offices.

☐ Paragraph 4

No significant differences.

☐ Paragraph 5

There are major differences at this point.

- The CRCNA effectively deleted the paragraph and only keeps it in the footnote for keeping a historic record.
- The RCA, PRCA and CanRC kept the paragraph and included disclaiming notes.
- Note the following differences. None are significant – until perhaps it becomes relevant to a burning social issue:

  ○ 'anarchists' versus 'other seditious people' versus 'other rebellious people'

  ○ 'subvert justice by introducing common ownership of goods' versus 'subvert justice, community of goods' versus 'subvert justice, introduce communion of goods'

  ○ 'corrupting moral order that God has established' versus 'confound decency and good order, which God hath established' versus 'overturn the decency that God established'.

When reflecting on the results of the above analysis, it should firstly be noted that there are differences in the choice of words, the word order and even the content. Some of these differences are more significant than others – especially where sections of Article 36 have been replaced (cf. Par. 3) or removed (cf. Par 5). Even the differences that may currently seem insignificant may well one day become significant if they should, for example, have a bearing on a burning social or political issue. The phrases that became controversial during the latter half of the 19th century were, after all, simply accepted for more than two centuries.

It should therefore also be noted that prominent and well-respected theologians (cf. Kuyper, Polman) firmly believed that De Brès and the Synod of Dort did in fact see it as the God-given task of those in civil authority to (for example) eradicate idolatry, and that this was therefore also what was confessed to be part of the tasks of those in authority and not only the goal with which they had to fulfil their tasks in order to provide room within which the church could fulfil its God-given calling. It must also be noted that it is furthermore not only a question of what De Brès and his fellow Reformers, including the Synod of Dort, in fact believed the tasks of those in authority were. It is also a question of whether De Brès and his fellow Reformers were correct in their views. This is, however, a discussion for another day.[229] A connected matter that may also be fruitful to address

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229. While the Afrikaans texts (original and revised) of Article 36 have not been supplied here, the saga concerning the wording in this text played itself out for more than 70 years within the GKSA. After the GKN's 1905 decision, there was a request in 1910 that the GKSA national synod should replicate this decision. The synod denied this. While it often seemed like a synod had dealt decisively with the matter, it kept returning

is whether theologians like Kuyper and Polman took proper note of the French version of the Belgic Confession and if the significance of the use of '*pour*' dawned upon them. For if they had, the case of what was meant with Article 36 seems to be open again.

It should lastly be noted that while initially only the first two of the four phrases that turned out to be goals rather than tasks were controversial, it will, in many cases, today be controversial to ask a civil (secular) government to execute their authority in such a way that the kingdom of Jesus Christ will be promoted and that the Word of the gospel will be preached everywhere. At times, when the churches lived in circumstances within which their civil governments were considered to be Christian, this was not seen as something that actually had to be considered.

■ Additional general remarks about the text of Article 36 and its content

The subsequent, more general, remarks on the text of Article 36 are not necessarily aimed solely at the changes called for and made since 1896:

- Vonk (1956, p. 629) argues that the Belgic Confession was written within the heat of the struggle to survive the violent persecution and that this is the reason why some words have clearly been left out and why some words had to be assumed. As an example, he refers to the original text of De Brès where he refers only to 'the civil', while he clearly must have had something like 'the civil government' or 'the civil authorities' in mind. Vonk argues that if De Brès was able to write the confession in a peaceful academic setting, he would not have made mistakes like this. This would also be the reason why he did not start out with the fact that all authority is seated in God and his sovereignty. While this aspect of the text should therefore be kept in mind when one tries to explain it, the fact that De Brès had opportunities to show his confession to other leaders indicates that he did not write the confession as such under that much pressure. It is, however, uncertain if the copies that he showed the other leaders (and which had even reached Calvin) had Article 36 included and, if so, which wording.

(footnote 229 cont.)

to the agenda. The synod's strengthening line of argumentation throughout the decades was that God indeed called the civil government to eradicate idolatry and false religion. The government had to use laws and policies to achieve this. It might, and sometimes even had to, use the God-given sword in this task. This point of view was regarded as scriptural and in accordance with historical Reformed theology. All of this meant that the controversial two phrases remained a challenged but unchanged part of Article 36. This was the case up to and until it was realised that the French text contained '*pour*' and that the Dutch (and Latin) text(s) were not only ambiguous but were therefore interpreted incorrectly. Muller (2010, pp. 93–165) discusses this in detail.

- There are several commentators that identify and discuss the biblical passages underlying Article 36. It should also be noted that several churches have added a number of somewhat different references to the text of the confession that they are using.
- Heyns (1992, p. 397), who, as most commentators do, says that the first sentence is articulated in light of 1 Peter 2:13, 14 and Romans 13:3–5, points to the fact than when Paul was writing his letter to the Romans, the emperor was a pagan and not a Christian. For this reason, an argument can be made that only Christian leaders have to be obeyed. Van Bruggen (1980, p. 187) points out that this sentence was also stated against those Anabaptists who had an anarchist and revolutionary attitude. These words were also meant to encourage those Reformed Christians who felt lured to the Anabaptists' point of view. It had to be clear that there was good reason for the warning in Proverbs 24:21: 'Fear the Lord, my son, and the king too. Do not associate yourself with riotous people'. When looking at the current value of this article and the protests that so often turn violent, this is still very relevant today.

■ The content of Article 36: What is being confessed?

The following comments are made concerning specific phrases within the five paragraphs of Article 36. These are matters that need to be understood correctly in order to apply the article in a valid way to current circumstances.

▢ Paragraph 1

▢ *'We believe …'*

Koopmans asked in 1939, on the eve of the Second World War (WWII), if it still made sense to hold onto Article 36 when it seemed as if the world was dominated by the belief in either the 'two swords' system or that of the neutral state (Koopmans 1939, pp. 262–265). He concluded this extended discussion of this question by remarking that, irrespective of the influence that Reformed Christians had or have today, this article starts out with: 'We believe …'. The commandments of the Lord should still be preached, whether people accept and obey them or not. When applying Article 36 today, this anti-pragmatist attitude should be kept in mind.

▢ *'We believe that our good God …'*

Linking on to what Koopmans has remarked above, two further remarks need to be made at this point. Firstly, whenever one starts out with 'we believe', it is necessary that what is confessed needs to be true and

clearly so. In the case of an article of the Belgic Confession, it also needs, in light of Articles 2–7, to be clear that the content is biblical. Secondly, it is only in Articles 13, 17 and 33 that God's goodness is articulated in this way. This articulation is, however, clearly linking Article 36 to Article 1, where it is not only confessed that God is good but that he also is the fountain of what is good – which is taken as the point of departure for this article and which reverberates throughout the article. In Article 36, God's goodness is not only juxtaposed with the depravity of men, but it also emphasises that it is out of his goodness that he has placed certain people in positions of authority. Since many people experience governments as oppressive, even today, it is telling that this experience is juxtaposed with God's goodness. When someone in authority causes problems, the Lord should not be blamed for that.

☐ '… because of the depravity of mankind …'

This phrase echoes Articles 14 and 15 and takes it as a point of departure and the underlying reason for why God has appointed people to positions of authority. While this sentence has not stirred up, and probably would still not stir up, serious opposition from within Reformed circles, several other Christians and most non-Christians will not accept what is confessed here. This phrase is a denouncement of the belief in the inherent goodness of humanity – a belief that is very common today in popular and especially secularist thinking. This false belief in the inherent goodness of humanity underlies not all, but many, systems of human rights and democracy.

☐ '… has appointed kings, princes and other authorities …'

This phrase has clearly been articulated in terms of De Brès's contexts. Koopmans (1939, p. 245) notes that while much is confessed concerning the relationship between the church and the state, very little is aimed at the state *per se*. Article 36 refers to 'authorities' that consist of certain individuals whom God has set in their particular offices.[230] It was in this vein that Hartvelt (1991, p. 344) remarked: 'On Sundays the state was sitting in church'.

It is to my mind also ironic that much of what we in democratic societies today consider to be 'fraudulent systems of patronage' resembles a system that was quite normal within the feudal system that was still operational during the Reformation and that was not rejected *per se*.

Van Bruggen (1980, p. 186) notes that Article 36 does not contain an extensive articulation of Reformed beliefs concerning the authority or

230. Concerning the use of 'offices', see Paragraph 2.

origin of the state. It also does not call for a specific form of civil government. It is a call towards those in authority rather than a lesson on their duties. It must, however, be noted that by confessing that it was God who appointed kings and others in authority, De Brès also confessed that Philip II was also appointed by God.

McCarter (2005) refers to a 1999 sermon of Dieleman that, according to McCarter, provides a representative view of the ministers of the Christian Reformed Church at that time, in which he stated that the confessed belief that God appoints those in authority removes any ground for revolution. Governments are not the product of human evolution and do not receive authority from 'we the people'.

While it is not a matter articulated expressly in Article 36, it is noteworthy that even the officials of secular governments have the inclination to appeal to something greater than themselves when taking an oath of office. This is indicative of a limited realisation and acknowledgement that more than mere human activity, something transcendental is at play.

□ '… governing through law and policies …'

While the meaning of this phrase is clear, some remarks are needed. God does not only appoint certain persons in civil offices and does not only attribute authority to these people. He wants those people to govern according to laws and not according to their own whims or agendas. Those in authority have, after all, been appointed in offices (cf. para. 2). By requiring that those in civil authority govern in accordance with laws, it restrains the random disorderliness and even chaos that might otherwise prevail and hinder the establishment of the peaceful life, lived in all godliness and decency, that is envisaged in Paragraph 4, for it is within such circumstances that God may be worshipped optimally.

At this point, the question may be to which laws the article is referring. The structural analysis indicated that this phrase has been placed in parentheses, which indicates that this phrase should rather be understood in broad terms. This is a simple reference to those laws that governments make. This should – in light of Article 28 – not be interpreted in a limited sense to refer to, for example, the ten commandments (cf. Muller 2010, p. 84).

□ '… in order that the lawlessness of people may be restrained'

Several commentators point to the tragic refrain in Judges, where it is lamented that everyone did as they saw fit in their own eyes. In the current postmodern era where 'anything goes', this phrase has become even more significant.

Vonk (1956, p. 630) provides an interestingly different perspective by referring at this point to the prophetic judgement of the Lord in Isaiah 3:4–6, which attributes the prevalence of chaos and violence in general society to a lack of sound leadership. This is one of several passages in the Bible which reveals that there comes a point where God will abandon a society to its own vices. If one thinks about the global issues such as climate change, pollution, poverty, inequality, and oppression that currently need decisive international leadership, which is lacking, one cannot help but think of this prophecy.

It is, however, important to follow De Brès's reasoning up to this point. God created with a pure, inherently good nature. Humanity has, however, rebelled against God and has torn itself from God. Without even paying attention to the guilt and liability (and the need for salvation) this brought about, the struggle needs to be taken to two fronts: the inner being of humans needs to be changed by the proclamation of the Word (Belgic Confession Article 24). The gospel must, however, be heard to be effective. Those in civil authority therefore need to, through their laws and policies, create the necessary room for the church to be able to proclaim the gospel.

Heyns (1992, p. 397) points to the fact that because certain forms of lawlessness only appear in the privacy of a human's heart, those in civil authority do not have the power to restrain everyone at all times and in all circumstances. The nearest that those in civil authority could come to restraining this is by manipulating citizens with a fear of punishment so that they will restrain themselves. This relative unruliness of a human's heart meant that it was insufficient for Article 36 to only indicate that the sword was given to those in civil authority (cf. para. 2). Without a statement concerning every human's inner being, Article 36 would be incomplete. Article 36 will deal with this in Paragraph 4 on the responsibility of those under civil authority.

☐ Paragraph 2

The paragraph starts with 'For that purpose' and articulates the purpose for which God has given the sword to those in authority, namely to restrain lawlessness. The fact that this paragraph is therefore in a subordinate relation to the previous one explains why De Brès did not articulate the means that those in authority have in a more nuanced and extensive way. Whereas it is clear that those in authority would use the sword at first only to threaten and that there are limits to its use, this is not stated. In the same way that Paragraph 1 does not contain an extensive treatise on the state, this paragraph only provides a focused view on the means.

The paragraph is, however, also linked to the first and to the confessed goodness of God, because God never expects anything from anyone without providing that person with the means to achieve the expected. It is, after all, God who, in the first instance, is the One who wants to restrain lawlessness.

Polman (s.a., p. 283) argues that this paragraph does not only convey Romans 13, but it is also aimed at the perfectionism of those Anabaptists who believed that the church did not need an earthly government anymore. Vonk (1956, p. 632) indicates that some Anabaptists accepted it when governments punished evildoers but rejected the death penalty. At this point, Polman refers to De Brès's view as stated in his *The root and origin*, where he asked who is more just and merciful than God. De Brès then pointed to the fact that it was God who, in Genesis 9:6, instituted the death penalty. Vonk (1956, pp. 589–606) not only discusses this matter in depth by using extended excerpts from De Brès's work but also relays De Brès's refutation of the Anabaptist accusation that the Reformers only relied on Old Testament passages for their support of the death penalty. De Brès argued that those Anabaptists who called the magistrates murderers for punishing certain evildoers with the death penalty were themselves driven by an evil spirit. With reference to John the Baptist, to Jesus' conversation with the Roman centurion, to the fact that there is no call in the New Testament that believers should resign from governmental positions and to Romans 13, Titus 3 and 1 Peter 2, De Brès says that authorities that applied the death penalty justly were in fact servants of God. De Brès also refuted the Anabaptists' application of passages such as Isaiah 2:4 and 11:6, 8. According to De Brès, these passages applied to the relation between true believers and that this prophecy was fulfilled daily when unbelievers who acted as wolves and bears repented and started to live peacefully. Lastly, De Brès also pointed out that the New Testament did not forbid the taking of revenge at all but that God placed that in the hands of those whom he placed in authority and who acted in an official rather than personal capacity.[231] This whole point of view is another matter that is articulated in Article 36 that has bearing on current circumstances, where several governments have abolished the death penalty.

This section can be concluded by pointing to the irony that De Brès was himself a victim of authorities who believed that they had to eradicate those whom they regarded as heretics with the sword. De Brès, tellingly, also refused assistance to escape as he believed that he would then transgress the sixth commandment.

231. Compare Muller (2010, pp. 88–92), who deals extensively with De Brès's views on this matter.

☐ Paragraph 3

It is quite possible that someone reading this paragraph for the first time may get the impression that two tasks are awarded here to those in government, one concerning governmental matters in general, and one concerning ecclesiastical matters: those in authority should restrain lawlessness in general and should also eradicate idolatry and destroy the (false) dominion of the Antichrist. This view of a twofold task may even be supported by a certain reading of Article 37. It is, however, not that simple at all.

In looking at this paragraph, it should be noted that whereas the legitimacy of the paragraph was at first mostly accepted, and only the meaning and scope of certain terms were under discussion, this – as has been discussed in detail previously in this chapter – changed during the latter half of the 19th century. So many changes have been made, however, that one can hardly speak of the 'Article 36 of the Belgic Confession' anymore without indicating to which version one is referring.[232] As indicated above, the saga started in the Netherlands during the second half of the 19th century.[233] Its ripple effects have still not abated, even today. After extensive analysis of the whole saga, it can be described as an attempt to solve the following two complex questions: firstly, did De Brès, in Article 36, mean that those in worldly authority had to actively combat idolators (in extreme cases, even with violence and with the use of discretion)? The issues related to this question were very nuanced. Proponents who would agree on some aspects would differ on others, such as: according to De Brès, what were those in worldly authority in fact called to? What was the scope of this calling? Did they have to execute this calling themselves

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232. The crisis of legitimacy brings another dilemma. On the one hand, one wants to explain the meaning of the text. On the other hand, the text itself is in question, and this cannot be solved without discussing the meaning, bringing about a chicken-and-egg dilemma. Historically, this also meant some groups felt that the perceived content (meaning) could not be confessed and that the paragraph had to be amended. The problematic phrases had to be rearticulated to bring them into accordance with Scripture, or they had to be replaced or scrapped. Others argued that the interpretation that the aforementioned group had of what was, in fact, confessed was incorrect and that it should either be left as it is or it should be reformulated to provide the actual meaning in a better way, or that explanatory notes could be added to indicate the actual meaning. As indicated above, this whole saga played out quite differently within different churches and even caused new schisms or obstructed and even prevented mergers. Muller (2010, pp. 93–155) deals with this extensively.

233. Compare Doedes (1880, pp. 513–515); the publication of Van Der Zwaag (1999) that is dedicated extensively to this saga; Koopmans (1939, pp. 246–265, especially p. 260); Visscher (1939, pp. 121–150), who emphasised the French-Wallonian text and its differences with the Dutch and Latin texts; Polman (s.a.) whose publications are some of the most extensive in the 20th century and who rejects Visscher's interpretation as 'bizarre'; Vonk (1956), who extensively analyses several of Calvin's and De Brès's own publications, including some of the lesser known ones; Van Bruggen (1980, pp. 186–189). For South Africa: Van Der Merwe (1969, pp. 1–64); Jonker (1994) and Heyns (1992, pp. 394–398). Several churches have also dealt with this matter, as indicated earlier in this chapter.

directly or rather indirectly through others? Did they have to execute their calling actively or only passively? Were they allowed or rather even obliged to use force? Even the death penalty? Were they called (and equipped) to deal with persons (idolators) or only with the phenomenon (idolatry)?

When comparing the different views on these sub-questions and 'hearing' the different proponents in discussion, it is like a conversation where participants would constantly say: 'Yes, I agree with that and with that, but ...'.

After establishing what De Brès actually meant when taking all the nuances into account, the follow-up question was if he had been correct, or at least to which extent. This entailed an even more important discussion, as for most who continue to confess the Belgic Confession today and who do not regard it as a historical document better left to the past, the deciding factor is not what De Brès meant but whether this is in accordance with Scripture and how this paragraph of Article 36 should therefore be treated.[234]

This saga, and the ensuing divisions in the churches, could have been mostly avoided if, as indicated above, the French text of Article 36 had, from the start, been read along with the Dutch and Latin texts. On the one hand, only the French and Dutch texts had been approved by the Synod of Dort. On the other hand, both the Dutch and Latin texts are ambiguous, yet this only becomes apparent when reading the French text. In this text, the controversial phrases are not stated as part of the task(s) of those in authority but as part of the goal with which the authority had to execute its office and calling.

☐ '... not only ... but also to ...'

Taking the four chiastically structured phrases following the phrase whereby the office of those in authority 'extends to upholding the sacred ministry' as goals with which they should execute their office[235] rather as (additional) tasks, the following should be noted concerning these four phrases.

☐ '... to combat and eradicate all idolatry and false worship ...'

Idolatry and false religion are separate yet connected phenomena. Idolatry leads to false worship. False worship is often infused by idolatry. As far as

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Article 36 is concerned, the relevant question is whether the emphasis is primarily on *all* idolatry and *all* false worship. Because the aim of the confession is to distinguish between the true and false forms of the Christian faith rather than to distinguish the Christian faith from others, it is my contention that this phrase was primarily aimed at the Roman Catholics (cf. Lord's Day 30 of the Heidelberg Catechism) rather than the (false) religion practised by the Jewish, Muslim or Hindu communities, who were known at the time but who were not in the centre of events. It must also be noted that the approved texts do not refer to serving false gods but to false religion, that is, a falsified way of serving the true God. The Roman Catholics were still regarded as Christians, yet Christians who were serving God in an invalid way. This view also concurs with the principle of imputability, as referred to earlier in this chapter.

When applying this phrase today, where several societies have become cosmopolitan and multireligious, it is vital to understand the scope of this phrase in a valid way. Take note that the Heidelberg Catechism's definition of idolatry also firstly speaks of people serving idols *along* with God before turning to those who serve idols *instead* of God.

▢ *'… to destroy the dominion of the Antichrist …'*

It is essential that this phrase should also be understood in the correct context. The word 'Antichrist', which appears four times in the New Testament, is used there to indicate an opponent or opponents of Jesus Christ. While the Reformers did at times view the pope as the Antichrist, this was not the case throughout. In those instances, it also referred to the office of the pope rather than to the person in that office. The pope was the leader of the false church (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 29). Also note that it is not the Antichrist (whoever this person may be) that needs to be destroyed but their dominion.

In light of the fact that Satan is the one behind all idolatry (1 Cor 10:20), this phrase was, therefore, primarily aimed at the dominion of the Antichrist as far as it was embodied within the Roman Catholic Church. According to Article 36, those in authority had to govern in such a way that the dominion of the Antichrist would be destroyed as far as it was embodied within the church and not primarily as it raised its head within this world in general.

This limited understanding of this phrase is again of vital importance to its valid application of the calling of those in civil authority.

▢ *'… to promote the kingdom of Jesus Christ …'*

It has been indicated in the structural analysis that this phrase, along with the preceding one, is at the centre of what is being confessed here. It is

therefore ironic that the phrase 'the kingdom of Jesus Christ' does not appear in this exact way in the New Testament. Ridderbos (1962, p. 19) compares this to phrases such as 'the kingdom of God', 'the kingdom of heaven' and 'the kingdom' as well as to Jesus' use of 'my kingdom' (Jn 18:36) and concludes that there would be no material difference in meaning. It can even be argued that this phase intends to combine all the other phrases rather than to select from them. It should also be noted that unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformed did not identify church and kingdom. Christ governs the whole world. His kingdom encapsulates all of creation. The church is the sphere in which this is acknowledged gratefully and wholeheartedly (cf. Belgic Confession Art. 27).

This view of the reign of Christ is of vital importance for the correct application of this phrase. Whether those in or under authority acknowledge it or not, Jesus Christ is the King of kings and will be returning to judge everyone.

Those in civil authority are therefore also called to govern in such a way that this message will be spread throughout the world, since the Holy Spirit uses the proclamation of the gospel to bring people to this conviction. By acknowledging the kingdom of Jesus Christ, it is also acknowledged that no earthly state can be the Messiah that saves the world from all its problems. Article 36 leaves no room for a totalitarian state that aims to be and promotes itself as the universal father of everyone. While the Roman emperors saw themselves as divine, Paul calls them servants of God.

De Wet (2010) finally connects the coming of the kingdom with the liberation from slavery. Where the kingdom has come, those in civil authority have become co-workers in the kingdom, not slaves, and also not of the church.

☐ '… to have the Word of the gospel proclaimed everywhere …'

While the proclamation of the Word is a key issue throughout the Belgic Confession, the emphasis in this phrase is not primarily on the proclamation itself but on the fact of where it should be proclaimed, namely everywhere. It should also be noted that it is not up to those in civil authority to proclaim the Word themselves but to govern in such a way that it can be proclaimed everywhere.

Like the preceding phrases, this phrase also has an eschatological undertone, for it is only when the gospel has been proclaimed everywhere that Christ will return and the coming of his kingdom will be completed. This phrase should also be understood regarding the principle of imputability. All will be judged. Those who believe in Christ will be acquitted.

The judgement of those who knew and did not believe will be harsher than it will be for those who never knew and whose judgement will be less harsh.

As far as the application of this phrase goes, it is difficult to see how the public–private distinction can be upheld. Especially if read with the preceding phrase, no area in life (e.g. public education) can be regarded as falling outside of the Kingdom of Christ and therefore as an area to which the Word does not apply in any way. While it has been indicated above how much difference there has been regarding the meaning and the status of certain phrases in the Belgic Confession, none of the proponents advocated a 'neutral' state. While the matter will be dealt with in more detail below, attention should be drawn to Article 15 of the *Constitution of South Africa of 1996,* which not only allows for religion to be practised at state and state-sponsored institutions but also determines the equitable way in which it should be carried out.

In concluding this subsection on the fourfold aims with which De Brès believes those in authority should fulfil their office, it is clear that he added these four since these were matters within which the Reformers needed the assistance of those in civil authority. It has been indicated that these phrases should be interpreted and applied in a limited rather than an extensive way.

When examining the present-day applicability of Article 36, it is therefore also important to keep this focused aspect of these four phrases in mind, as they do not necessarily represent an exhaustive list. There may be (and in fact are) other connected matters with which the church also needs the assistance of those in civil authority. While these other matters may not be on the table as such, the fact is that the Belgic Confession is in principle open to such matters being included.

☐ *'… so that God will be revered and served by everyone as he commands in his Word'*

This phrase encapsulates the theocratic ideal in a clear and unrestricted way: God rules and everyone must serve him. In order to achieve this, he uses both the church and the state. While he uses each in their own way and with their own specific aim and means, there is one overarching aim – that all people will serve him as God – and also in the way that he reveals in his Word.

It is, however, important to note that the emphasis in this phrase is on the object (who) and the means (how) rather than on the subject (by whom). Take note of the word order and the fact that the verbs are in the passive voice. The emphasis is not on who should revere him but that he is the One who should be revered and honoured (by everyone).

The recognition of this emphasis is important for the application of this phrase. Those in authority have the office to see that God is revered (by everyone) rather than that everyone reveres God. He should be revered, not as everyone pleases, but as he commands in his Word.

Also note the emphasis that the proclamation of the Word therefore receives throughout Paragraph 3. Those in civil authority must firstly *protect the proclamation of the Word* by ensuring that the church has the room to do so, in order for the Word to *secondly be proclaimed everywhere* (by the church) so that God will thirdly *be revered according to his (proclaimed) Word*. While different contexts may, to some extent, require different ways to serve the Lord, this paragraph leaves no room for a self-styled religion or a democratisation thereof. In this way, this paragraph is clearly linked to the apostolic nature of the church. Worship God. Worship him as he commands in his Word.

☐ Paragraph 4

While De Brès has up to this point articulated the office of those in authority, he moves the focus to those under authority in this paragraph.

It has been noted in the structural analyses that the parties named in this paragraph are linked to the those of Paragraph 1, the opening paragraph of the section dealing with those in authority.

The very fact the De Brès included a section on the responsibility of those under authority is reflective of the balanced nature of Reformed thinking. Appeals to government are often littered with demands. Yet here De Brès is balancing the office of those in and those under authority – very much in the same way that it is currently said that people do not only have rights, but they also have corresponding responsibilities. Where those in authority are responsible for enabling those under authority to serve God according to his Word, those under authority have the obligation to obey and support those in authority. Without this obedience and support, those in authority would struggle to function.

This is one of the reasons why De Brès, without providing a complete list of responsibilities, not only included paying tax but also included a call to prayer for those in authority. This is significant – even today. In doing so, one recognises that those in authority are from and under God and that they are (still) imperfect and cannot fulfil their office without the guidance and provision of God. With this prayer, one acknowledges the significance of God's mercy – even towards those who are still living as his enemies – as well as the fact that faith is a gift of God. Even today, this remains one of the most important responsibilities that Christians have towards those in

authority – whether they are godly or not. One should be hesitant to criticise people one has not prayed for.

Taking the context of De Brès into account, it was important for him to emphasise that everyone, every citizen, had to submit to those in civil authority. In this way, De Brès wanted to distinguish his fellow Reformed Christians from those Anabaptists who refused to acknowledge the authority of those in civil authority and to pay taxes to them. This was also an admonishing towards those Reformed Christians not to fall into the same trap. This phrase, however, also confirmed that even those Roman Catholic clerics who did not regard themselves as civil subjects under civil authorities (including the civil magistrates) and, having to obey civil laws, in fact had to do so (cf. De Groot 1955, p. 146).

Take note that De Brès stated that everyone had to be obedient in everything that was not in conflict with the Word of God. This is essential for the correct application of Article 36. On the one hand, it limits the scope of the authority of those in authority. On the other hand, it acknowledges their independence (from the church) and affords them the benefit of the doubt. For example, it is not necessary for those in authority to provide a biblical passage for every decision that they take, for instance, in determining the amount of tax to be paid. Yet whenever a civil decision or a law clearly violates what has been revealed in God's Word, then those in authority cannot claim that they have to be obeyed, as they are acting as servants of God.[236]

As with the previous paragraphs, this paragraph also ends with a motivation. Paragraph 1 concluded with: 'and everything can happen in an orderly way among people'. Paragraph 3 concluded with: 'so that God will be revered by everyone according to the commandments of His word'. Paragraph 4 now concludes with: 'so that we may live a peaceful life in all godliness and decency'. It should therefore be noted even today that where everything happens in an orderly way and God is revered as he commands in his Word, people can expect to live a peaceful life filled with godliness and decency. Our world full of suffering, violence, poverty, inequality and evil is crying out for such a life.

With its final words, as with the call to prayer, Paragraph 4 emphasises a vertical dimension, whereas most see the relationship between the state and its subjected citizens merely in secular, horizontal terms.

236. While it falls outside this chapter's scope, someone like Witte (2007, p. 3) explains how the concepts of a just resistance towards a civil government eventually developed within Reformed circles. Where Calvin called for patience towards authorities and prayer towards God, Beza, especially after the horrific events during the so-called 'Bartholomeus night' (known in English as the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre), and Johannes Althusius developed the concept of resistance, arguing that there at times came a point where it was not only permissible, in fact, but required.

☐ Paragraph 5

Where Paragraph 4 has not seen much controversy and has been left mostly unchanged since its acceptance, Paragraph 5 has also come into the firing line. Some churches have left it untouched. Some have simply removed it (cf. the CRCNA). While others (cf. the RCA) have kept it, they have effectively distanced themselves from it, or at least from how it has been formulated.

It has been mentioned previously in this chapter that it has been questioned seriously whether an article such as Article 36 belongs within a confession at all, especially in our current contexts. I have argued for its inclusion. I have also indicated why the Belgic Confession, in light of its original context, would have been – as a matter of speaking – like an arrow without a point if Article 36 had been omitted at that time. It has furthermore also been indicated in the discussion on the first four paragraphs that Article 36 was not only essential in its original context but that this article still contributes to the present value of this confession. As far as the Belgic Confession would be like an arrow without a point or a blunt axe, the fifth and final paragraph represents the sharp cutting edge of such an axe. Everything that De Brès had confessed up to this point was articulated in order to indicate as clearly as possible how wide the gorge between the Reformers and Anabaptists was and that the accusations (invalid excuse) that the Reformed Christians were as evil as the revolutionary Anabaptists and deserved to be persecuted were baseless and damaging to a Christian community. The Reformed Christians were not Roman Catholics, but they certainly were not Anabaptists either. Even so, a simple reading of the words of Paragraph 5 falls harshly on one's ears within the multireligious contexts where most of the adherents of this confession currently live (cf. Janssen 2016, p. 140).

It has been argued that the reference to the Anabaptists is not aimed at them as a group or as persons but at their system of belief. This is, however, not supported by the text at this point.

When one or the members of one's church are persecuted unjustly and cruelly by fellow Christians or their lives are put in danger by the actions of fellow Christians, it is understandable that one would call them out by name and distance oneself from them as a group, and that one would not only reject their beliefs. At this point, it also needs to be remembered that, as previously indicated, while the Belgic Confession was originally written when the Reformed Christians were persecuted, it was accepted when the Reformed movement had gained much (dearly achieved) political control. One easily becomes vindictive in such circumstances. While all of this may explain the inclusion, it still does not mean that it is justified.

Vonk (1956, p. 554) indicates that this paragraph did not refer to the Anabaptists at first but that it had only been added in 1566. Denouncements like these are also not unique within the Belgic Confession, since Articles 12 and 13 also contain anathemic denouncements. These denouncements are, however, clearly aimed at the beliefs and not the persons harbouring them. Even so, the fifth paragraph was approved by the Synod of Dort with the identification of the groups included.

With all of this said, however, one needs to note that the paragraph starts out with 'in this matter' [Dutch: *hierover*] we detest the Anabaptists and all of those riotous people, and so on. While the article clearly states the feelings of those confessing this and is clearly rejecting the Anabaptists and the other mentioned groups, this is for a stated reason as well as in a limited way only. The Anabaptists are not detested as such (and as fellow Christians *per se*) but only as far as the mentioned matters are concerned. If this is the only reason for keeping this paragraph in the confession, it is of little comfort.

Lastly, the fact that Article 36 refers to the Anabaptists by name does, however, emphasise the general gist of the article and is, to my mind, a confirmation that the phrases in Paragraph 3 referring to 'false religion' and the 'dominion of the Antichrist' should be understood as a reference to practices within the Roman Catholic Church and not to non-Christian religious systems in general. As indicated above, this is crucial for the current application of this article.

■ Conclusion

I end this chapter with a few concluding reflections.

Even though the Belgic Confession was formulated and accepted centuries ago, in the language and idiomatic expressions of the era, it contains biblical principles and truths that are as applicable today as they were then. This is assisted by the fact that neither De Brès, who wrote the confession in 1561, or the Synod of Dort, who accepted it as 'one of the three forms of Reformed confessional unity', opted for a specific form of government. This would have limited its present-day applicability severely.

The fact that it was, however, written as a response to a very specific issue in very specific circumstances and with a specific aim – namely, to distance the Reformed Christians from the Roman Catholics but especially from certain Anabaptists – eventually led to the changing of Article 36, in which this issue was addressed point blank in several ways by several churches. Article 36 has therefore become the most varied article in the confession. These variations have been identified and discussed. One can consequently hardly speak of this article today without indicating to which version one is referring or by stating that one is referring to a section on which the versions still agree!

The concept of religious freedom has been vastly developed since the drafting and final acceptance of the Belgic Confession – especially in Western-oriented liberal democracies. Societies have also become much more globalised, containing people of multicultural, multi-ethnic and multireligious communities with multiple worldviews and ethical standards. Drawing borders has become much more complex. All these factors have contributed to accelerating a process which started with the dawn of the Enlightenment, whereby the concept of religious freedom (in a legal sense) morphed into a religious equality (in an ethical sense) and within which it seems as if civil authorities have no other option than to keep a clear division between church and state (cf. Jonker 1994, p. 86). This deformation has actually emphasised the need for an article such as Article 36, which starts out with: 'We believe – in spite of whatever we experience in practice, we believe, taking the goodness of our living almighty God as our first, shared point of reference'. This transcendental aspect of Article 36, appealing to an 'External Reality', is of vital significance today in a secularised, post-Christian, individualistic world where so much is considered subjective and relative and where religion is easily pushed back to the sphere of the personal or private community. Article 36 primarily deals with the internal and external aspects of every human and only in a secondary sense with a private–public division of life, as if there are areas which fall outside of the authority and the reign of the kingdom of Jesus Christ and where his Word should not be proclaimed openly and with confidence (also see Belgic Confession Art. 2).

While there are differences of opinion on certain indicated aspects of Article 36, there is near complete agreement that this article leaves no room for a so-called 'neutral state' which, as Janssen (2016, p. 140) also concurs, is actually built on a secularist, pseudoreligious belief. It has often been rightly warned (cf. Osterhaven 1964, p. 191) that a so-called neutral state will morph into an aggressive atheistic state that will endure nothing else but unbelief. To my mind, this does not only apply to political states, but also to societies and communities, including those which function mainly online. The so-called 'cancel culture', where groups are allowing only certain people freedom of speech, can be given as an example. One could argue that this is more or less the same as the Reformers who would not allow (Christian) heretics and false prophets to proclaim their ideas or start groups. However, the measure should, as De Brès has also stated, always be whether the content is in accordance with Scripture, or at least not contradicting Scripture. As has been argued in this chapter,[237] Article 36 allows for the latter option.

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237. Cf. Chapter 1.

To declare himself the judge: The last judgement (Article 37)

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■ Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ernst Troeltsch could still remark that the eschatological office was mostly shut because of a lack of attention, but halfway through the century, Hans Urs von Balthasar noted that it was working overtime (Troeltsch 1925, p. 36; Von Balthasar 1957, p. 403). Meanwhile, many had followed the lead of the dialectic theology of Karl Barth and others by broadening the definition of eschatology from the traditional emphasis on the end times and its specifics of the final resurrection and judgement, heaven and hell, to an eschatology centred on the eternal moment that defines the present by transcending it (see Schwöbel 2022 and, more broadly, Dugan & Ziegler 2022). Eternity, then, relates to time as judgement. Much of 20th-century eschatology has been stamped by the experience of the World Wars, particularly by World War I, but the horizon of 21st-century eschatology is different. Neither the atrocities of war nor the end of the optimistic era of the 19th century define the eschatological interest but the realisation that planet Earth can no

longer accommodate the current modern (particularly Western) lifestyle. The threat of climate change poses an imminent and apocalyptic challenge for humanity. Even in secular terms, it can be defined as a judgement of humanity's hubris, a reckoning long due. Apocalyptic scenarios do not offer much opportunity for comfort, unless one would welcome the destruction or extinction of humanity and the end of the world as we know it as comfort. Movements such as antinatalism, therefore, promote that people should not have children. Donna J Haraway has called to make kin, not babies (Haraway 2016).

Against this background, the eschatological article of the Belgic Confession may belong to the most relevant passages of this document. It aims at comfort for believers in times of need. Written in haste and under threat, amid rapidly changing political and ecclesial circumstances, the Belgic Confession closes with an article on the coming of Jesus Christ as Judge to finally establish his full reign on the earth.

In this chapter, I offer an interpretation of Article 37 of the Belgic Confession based on a double contextualisation: not only the historical and literary contexts of Article 37 are taken into account, but also the present societal and theological contexts. The following steps are taken to this end: firstly, the intimate connection between Article 37 and the previous article on civil government is highlighted (§2); secondly, the theological emphases of Article 37 are examined through a close reading of the text (§3); thirdly, its use of the Bible is explored by an exegetical analysis of the biblical texts cited or alluded to (§4). Fourthly, the theological relevance and limitations of this part of the Belgic Confession are considered and assessed (§5). The article closes with a conclusion (§6).

■ Relation to Article 36

Like the Gospel of John, the Belgic Confession has two endings. The first words of Article 37, '*Finalement, nous croyons*' [Finally, we believe], are very similar to the opening statement of Article 36, '*Nous croyons finalement*' [We believe finally] (see for the original text Busch 2009). This glitch in the redaction process not only shows the haste with which Guido de Brès drafted this document, but it also indicates that two pieces of text from different origins have been combined here. Article 36 is De Brès's reworking of Articles 39 and 40 of the Gallican Confession, which are the concluding articles of that confession (Gootjes 2007, p. 90). But Article 37 originates from De Brès's reading of Beza's confession (Beza 1955). Chapter 6 of Beza's confession begins with: 'Finally we believe'. The repeated use of the word 'finally' may well be the result of the addition of Article 37 to an earlier draft of the confession, inserted by De Brès after he was able to consult Beza's confession.

Although the Gallican Confession and Beza's confession were published around the same time (May 1559), De Brès may not have had the latter at his disposal right away.

It should be noted that De Brès obviously did not see a substantial difference between the theology of Calvin, which stamped the Gallican Confession, and that of Beza (Balke 2001). Later research has sometimes suggested a major difference between Calvin's biblical and pastoral theology and Beza's more scholastic type of system, but for contemporaries, Calvin's and Beza's theologies were similar (Van Sliedrecht 1996). Of course, De Brès's confession is not free of scholastic tendencies itself, particularly in the opening phrases of the Belgic Confession in Article 1:

> We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God – eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good.

Still, Beza was more than merely the paragon of scholastic theology that earlier research made him. His catechism, for instance, also influenced the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), which is clearly not a fruit of scholastic theology (Davis 2014, p. 257; Hollweg 1961). Still, it should be admitted that the divine decree features prominently in Beza's confession (Gootjes 2007, p. 91), in the opening chapter as well as in the chapters on God the Father as Creator and on the creation of man. While De Brès's Belgic Confession does not share this strong emphasis on God's decree, Article 37 nonetheless emphasises election repeatedly (see §3).

The juxtaposition of Articles 36 and 37 results in a recalibration of the Calvinistic view on the civil magistrates. The article on civil government is not the final word in the Belgic Confession, although it is in the Gallican Confession as well as in Calvin's *Institutes*. This implies that no government can speak the word or execute the last judgement. In terms later coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1998, pp. 137–162), the civil magistrates belong to the penultimate, whereas Christ's judgement is the ultimate. This limits the task and authority of any temporal government. Meanwhile, tension arises between the tasks of the civil magistrate and Christ's judgement, as De Brès famously wrote:

> And their office is, not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of the antichrist may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted. (Art. 37)

Remarkably, the destruction of the kingdom of the antichrist does not reappear in the final article on Christ's judgement, although it would have made sense to underline that it is not the civil government but Christ who

conquers the antichrist finally. It is therefore unclear whether De Brès realised what the effect would be of placing a final article on eschatological judgement after the article on civil government. Meanwhile, in the architecture of the text as such, the final article bears on the interpretation of the article before. Wim Verboom has argued that while Article 36 pictures the church in this world as raising up signs of the kingdom of God in the present reality, the church of Article 37 is the pilgrim, making their way through the world to the kingdom of God (Verboom 2001, p. 82). This contrast may be a little overstated, as in Article 36, the church only comes into view through the lens of the civil magistrates, who have a responsibility to create and maintain the circumstances in which the church may flourish. This does not imply that the church itself raises up signs of Christ's presence in a more or less triumphant way. That would probably be alien to the mind of De Brès, who experienced how the Reformed church was threatened by the civil magistrates.

■ Close reading

A close reading of the text of Article 37 demonstrates some remarkable emphases by De Brès concerning eschatology.

■ Judicial focus

The main statement of Article 37 is that Jesus Christ will come to perform the office of a judge. There is no trace in this article of the way Christ was pictured in Article 21, as the one who sacrificed himself ('*grand Sacrificateur*') by offering himself on the tree of the cross. True consolation and comfort are found, according to that article, in his wounds, so the believers 'have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God than this one and only sacrifice'. In Article 21, Christ is on the other side of the judicial process, 'condemned as a criminal by Pontius Pilate', although he was, in fact, innocent. In Article 37, however, Christ's weakness, wounds and sacrifice have no place. This is remarkable, because in the Bible, Christ's wounds and his judgement are closely tied. Christ as Judge is pictured as the Lamb who still bears the wounds of being slain (Rv 5:6). Of course, this is important for the actual judgement situation: both for the ungodly, who inflicted these wounds on him, as well as for the godly, who find comfort in his wounds. This shows in the Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer (QA) 52 on the statement from the creed that Christ will come to judge the quick and the dead:

> In all distress and persecution, with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgement of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me. (QA 52)

Obviously, the fact that no explicit reference is made to Christ's sacrifice and his being condemned by Pontius Pilate should not be overstated. But this is not the only remarkable aspect of Christ's activity as judge in Article 37. De Brès interprets the trumpets of the archangels (1 Th 4:16) as people being 'summoned' as if by a subpoena. Moreover, Christ's judgement is purely a judgement based on works. 'The dead will be judged according to the things they did in the world, whether good or evil'. No reference is made to God's grace or forgiveness. Rather, the godly 'will receive the fruits of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered; their innocence will be openly recognized by all'. Of course, De Brès has developed a Reformed doctrine of justification in Article 23, but no trace of that doctrine is found in his article on the final judgement. Rather, the godly are declared just because they are, in fact, innocent and just. One can understand this as a result of God's grace in justification, but as it stands, the language is rather analytic and the judgement based on works. Besides, 'their cause' (De Brès continues the judicial language) 'will be acknowledged as the cause of the Son of God'. So, the judge also has a stake in the judicial process at the end of times: his cause will prevail.

While the Belgic Confession obviously served as a Reformed confession of faith, there is reason to consider which part of Article 37 would be unacceptable for Roman Catholic authorities and believers. De Brès's context is important in this respect. De Brès spent much of his life opposing the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand and the Anabaptist radicals on the other (De Brès 1555, 1565). One of the main drivers for his writing of the Belgic Confession is to demonstrate to the civil authorities that the Reformed should not be equated with these Anabaptists. To that end, he moves relatively close to the Roman Catholic Church in areas in which he wishes to distance himself from the Anabaptists. For instance, the Anabaptist appeal to the inner light instead of the authority of the Holy Scriptures is countered by De Brès in the extensive articles on the Scriptures (Art. 3–7). In these articles, De Brès shows remarkable openness for the deuterocanonical or apocryphal writings that the Roman Catholic Church accepted in the canon: 'The church may certainly read these books and learn from them as far as they agree with the canonical books' (Art. 6; cf. Huijgen 2012, p. 117). Moreover, he does not deny that the authority of the church is relevant to establishing the authority of the canonical books of the Bible, although the testimony of the Spirit and the testimony of the Bible itself are more important:

> We receive all these books [...] not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God. (Art 6)

Of course, in the doctrine of justification and ecclesiology, the front against which De Brès writes is the Roman Catholic Church, but in matters of the authority of Scripture and the relation between civil government and the eschatological judgement, De Brès aims primarily at proving that the Reformed are no Anabaptists. Article 36 makes clear that Reformed believers respect the power of the civil authorities, even when they wield the sword to promote the right religion. In other words, the Reformed will not take up the sword to overturn all authority as the Anabaptists had in their revolt in 1534 Münster, which stamped the consciousness of Europe in much the same way that the attacks of 11 September 2001 are the benchmark for violence in the 21st century, at least in the West. So De Brès does not seem to have a problem with a judgement according to works, at least in Article 37. Still, there is one typically Reformed aspect in De Brès's picture of the last judgement: election.

■ Election

De Brès writes on behalf of smaller groups of Reformed Christians who face ever more persecution from those in power. They are 'at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil officers' (Art. 37). God will punish 'the evil ones who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world'. The undertones of pain and persecution can hardly be overlooked when these passages are read.

De Brès consistently pictures the godly as the elect. The Lord will come 'when the number of the elect is complete'. The other two times he refers to the godly, he also calls them elect: the judgement is 'very pleasant and a great comfort to the righteous and elect', and 'the faithful and elect will be crowned with glory and honor'. The godly are counted righteous by their works and are faithful to their calling, but above all: they are elect [*esleus*]. Within the context of the entire Belgic Confession, this obviously refers to Article 16 on election. De Brès pictures election in an infralapsarian way and notes that works are not taken into account. While 'all Adam's descendants' had fallen 'into perdition and ruin', 'God showed himself to be as he is: merciful and just'. He is merciful because he saves:

> From this perdition those who, in the eternal and unchangeable divine counsel, have been elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. (Art. 37)

Remarkably, not only human persons are elect, but the Son of God will profess the names of the elect 'before God his Father and the holy and elect angels'. So, even angels are elect. This shows that De Brès mentions election wherever he can in Article 37.

In the later debates concerning the five points of the Remonstrants, this text played an important role, combined with Article 37 of the Belgic Confession. The Reformed underlined that election not only means God's eternal and unchangeable decree to save believers and to condemn unbelievers: God does not take anything into account, and he does not elect a certain type of persons, but a specific number of persons (Canons of Dort I.10). For this argumentation, a phrase from Article 37 proved important: 'that when the time appointed by the Lord is come (which is unknown to all creatures) and the number of the elect is complete'. The former phrase is obviously biblical (e.g. Mt 24:36–44), but the latter is not. It seems that Christ can only come once a specific number is met, but it is difficult to underpin this based on the Bible.

■ The role of conscience

For De Brès, human conscience plays a major role in the last judgement. He mentions it twice in Article 37. Firstly, 'the books (that is, the consciences) will be opened, and the dead will be judged'. Secondly, '[t]he evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences'. Both citations are problematic. The first obviously refers to Revelation 20:

> And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. (v. 12)

These 'books' are obviously sources of knowledge, but the biblical text provides no hint that the consciences are meant, as if every individual conscience would serve as a book to be opened. Leaving aside what the meaning of the biblical text actually is, it is clear that De Brès adds something to the interpretation that is obviously important to him: the human conscience, once opened, testifies the truth. This presupposes an understanding of conscience as an objective registrar of all deeds, words and thoughts, including the goodness or badness of these. Therefore, in the second phrase De Brès uses, the ungodly are convicted 'by the witness of their own consciences'. Within the judicial framework that dominates De Brès's Article 37, the conscience of the wicked serves as witness for the prosecution.

De Brès's confidence in conscience as witness can be demonstrated by two other articles in the Belgic Confession. In the article on justification (Art. 23), De Brès wrote that the obedience of Christ crucified is 'enough to cover all our sins and to make us confident, freeing the conscience from the fear, dread, and terror of God's approach'. For if we had to appear before God relying 'on ourselves or some other creature, then, alas, we would be swallowed up'. So De Brès knows that conscience can accuse a person, but he notes that Christ's righteousness sets the conscience free. A similar

expression is found in the next article, on sanctification: 'our poor consciences would be tormented constantly if they did not rest on the merit of the suffering and death of our Savior' (Art. 24). So, it is only because of Christ's merit that the consciences are not tormented constantly. But the sum total of De Brès's estimation of conscience seems to fall short from a pastoral perspective. It seems that if one's conscience accuses the person, then the person is not resting on Christ's merit and possibly belongs to those who are lost forever. In short, there seems to be no comfort once conscience accuses. Any accusation is true, and any true accusation leads to condemnation. On the other hand, believers may rest assured with a conscience that does not condemn them. But this image of a conscience that does not alarm the person seems to fit the biblical image of the Pharisee better than it does the Reformed Christian, at least in practice.

■ Separation

The Belgic Confession's article on eschatology may strike modern readers as strongly individualistic. The judgement takes place by way of opening the consciences and hearing the testimonies of consciences, which are, of course, bound to individuals. One cannot be condemned on the basis of someone else's conscience. So, the focus is on the individual, who either belongs to the elect or to the ungodly. Corporate and collective aspects are not completely absent from the Belgic Confession, however. The climactic final sentence uses the first-person plural instead of singular: 'So we look forward to that great day'. Meanwhile, the main focus is on the eternal destination of individuals, not on the renewal of creation or the peace that the kingdom of God will bring. 'All people will give account' and all 'secrets and hypocrisies of all people will be publicly uncovered in the sight of all'. So the individual is shamed in front of all humanity. The focus of Article 37 remains primarily individual.

Christ's judgement will lead to a separation between 'the wicked and evil people' on the one hand and 'the righteous and elect' on the other. For the former, God's judgement is horrible and dreadful, but for the latter, it is 'very pleasant and a great comfort'. The reasons for this comfort are: (1) their total redemption will be accomplished; (2) they will receive the fruits of their labour; (3) their innocence will be openly recognised by all; and (4) they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring on the evil ones. This fourth aspect seems more problematic than the other three, because it seems that the elect will find pleasure and comfort in the vengeance inflicted on other people. Not only do they rejoice in their own safety or in God's righteousness, but particularly in God's vengeance on others. The question is, of course, whether this is biblical and whether this fits those who are saved by grace through Jesus Christ. It is not entirely clear whether

the elect will find pleasure in God's vengeance on all the nonelect or only on those 'who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world'. In other words, are only the worst ungodly, the tyrants, subjected to God's vengeance, or does this apply to all the wicked people? What follows seems to apply to all the nonelect:

> 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 eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'. (Art. 37)

This is a quotation from Matthew 25:41, applying to all those on the Lord's left hand, who are sent into the eternal fire. The Belgic Confession seems to imply that at least part of the pleasure and comfort of at least some of the elect consists in the eternal torment of fellow human beings. For many modern readers, that will be a disturbing thought, but the question also remains whether this idea has a biblical basis. That remains to be seen.

◼ Biblical texts

A distinction can be made between texts that are explicitly quoted in the text of Article 37 of the Belgic Confession and texts referred to in the margins of the original edition. The cited texts are 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Revelation 20:12, Matthew 12:36, Matthew 25:41, Revelation 3:5 and Revelation 7:17; 21:4. The text from the letter to the Thessalonians uses apocalyptic imagery (Wanamaker 1990, p. 172). The 'trumpet of God' is an image that occurs rather frequently in the Old Testament in contexts of eschatological judgement (cf. Ex 19:16, 19; Is 27:13; Jl 2:1). The trumpet calls the dead to life that they may appear before the judgement seat of God (Friedrich 1964, pp. 86–88). In this light, De Brès's interpretation that people are summoned for the judgement seat of Christ is in line with the main tenets of this biblical text.

The texts most referred to in Article 37 of the Belgic Confession are in large part taken from the Gospel of Matthew and the book of Revelation. To the mind of the present author, the Gospel of Matthew fits the intentions of De Brès better than many of the other biblical witnesses because there is no other gospel in which the judgement according to works is accentuated as much as it is in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew emphatically places the Sermon on the Mount, which is the constitution of the kingdom of God, at the beginning of his gospel, and he returns to it at the end of the gospel when Jesus brings his disciples together on the mountain where Jesus had taught them, a clear allusion to the mountain where Jesus preached (Mt 28:16; cf. Mt 5:1). He commissions them to go and make disciples among the nations, 'teaching them to obey everything I commanded you' – another allusion to the Sermon on the Mount. While the Gospel of Matthew shares

the parable of the wedding banquet with the Gospel of Luke, it is only in Matthew's gospel that the king notices one of the guests who is not wearing wedding clothes. The man is tied hand and foot and thrown outside, 'into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Mt 22:13). What does it mean not to wear wedding clothes? Most probably, it means not living in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount. The same holds true for the parable of the ten virgins, five of whom run out of oil before the bridegroom arrives (Mt 25:1–13). This parable is close to the passage on the separation of the sheep and the goats, which is quoted in Article 37 of the Belgic Confession. In this parable, the judgement according to works is obvious (Mt 25):

> Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me'. (vv. 34–36)

De Brès cites the first part of what is said to those on the left-hand side of the king: 'Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"' (Mt 25:41). The other text De Brès quotes from Matthew concerns the account everyone will have to give on the day of judgement for every empty word they have spoken (Mt 12:36). The context of this biblical verse is concerned with the separation between the good and the evil: good trees give good fruit, and good people bring good things out of the good stored up in them, but bad trees deliver bad fruit, and bad people bring evil things. 'For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned' (Mt 12:37).

Obviously, the book of Revelation plays an important role in Article 37 of the Belgic Confession, as it counts as depicting the last judgement and the resulting future states of heaven and hell.

Revelation 20:12 is a crucial text in Article 37, as it marks the transition from the depiction of the stage of the last judgement to the actual execution of judgement: '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'. Earlier, it was remarked that De Brès emphasises that the books are, in fact, human consciences. A closer reading of the biblical text not only demonstrates that this equation is unlikely but also that De Brès's beloved theme of election would have been close at hand had he left human consciences out. Revelation 20 mentions 'the book of life', in which the names of Christians were written. 'Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire'

(Rv 20:15). This same book is mentioned in Revelation 3:5, a verse which De Brès cites in part:

> The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. (Art. 37)

De Brès only cites the latter phrase, expanding it with the holiness and elect nature of the angels, but he does not connect election to the book of life. It is not clear why. Could it be that the mere suggestion that someone's name could, in principle, be blotted out from the book of life was problematic? But this statement may well be read as underscoring the surety of God's election.

Exegetically, the book of life has its background both in the Old Testament and in Hellenistic literature. In Exodus 32:32–33, Moses begs for God's forgiveness for Israel after the history with the golden calf. If God will not forgive, 'then blot me out of the book you have written'. As Grant R. Osborne observes, 'Later apocalyptic ideas associated this register with eternal life and fellowship with God' (Osborne 2002, p. 180). That this book is mentioned in the letter to Sardis is no coincidence, as this long-time capital of the Persian and Seleucid Empires served as a repository for such records. The removal of a name from such records counted as a grave shame. Deuteronomy 29:20 associates the removal of a name with capital punishment. To be erased and forgotten is a severe penalty. So, in fact, the opening of the books in Revelation refers to one's name being recorded among those who belong to God's people, subsidiary to the good or evil deeds carried out by those included or excluded. While De Brès's addition of the idea that the books are consciences remains implausible, his emphasis on a judgement according to works is not alien to the exegesis of the Book of Revelation.

Revelation 7:17 and 21:4 both state that God will wipe away the tears from the faces of believers. The Greek verb used for 'wiping away' is a very strong verb with connotations of destroying or obliterating. But why were these Christians crying? The contextual answer is because of the tribulations and persecutions they have been suffering: 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Rv 7:14). The question is whether these same connotations are present in Revelation 21, where the new heaven and the new earth are pictured. The sorrows from which the people are relieved seem of a more general nature, connected to the human condition as such: 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' (Rv 21:4). The connection between the removal of death and the wiping away of tears can be retraced to the Old Testament. Isaiah 25 reads:

> On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. (vv. 6–8)

So wiping away all tears is centred on death being swallowed up in victory, and it leads to the restoration of Israel, acknowledged by all nations. Obviously, De Brès could not have taken all these nuances into account, even if he would have discerned them.

The final aspect of De Brès's use of the Bible to be discussed here is angelology. The first text he quotes is 1 Thessalonians 4:

> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. (v. 16)

That the angels are elect can be derived from 1 Timothy 5:21. It is not unfitting for the final article, on the last judgement, to emphasise the role of angels, given the prominent place the angels hold in the book of Revelation. Theologically, however, their role remains unclear.

■ Theological considerations

Many years have passed since De Brès wrote the Belgic Confession. Since then, it has found its way among the forms of unity of various Reformed churches in the Dutch tradition. Given the change in context, the question is legitimate as to what extent the formulations of the Belgic Confession need to be updated, the content supplemented or even altered. This is not an unfitting question for a Reformed theologian to address, as the Reformers themselves were definitely not directors of a museum (Barth 2004, p. 181). Moreover, the 20th century has shown a development of new avenues in eschatology that may provide useful insights.

The Belgic Confession's approach to the last judgement is undoubtedly Christocentric, in that Christ as judge is the central figure who separates the elect and the ungodly. Meanwhile, the connection between Christ the Judge and Christ the Saviour could be stronger, as it is in the Heidelberg Catechism, for instance. Question 52 asks: 'How does Christ's return "to judge the living and the dead" comfort you?' Part of the answer is: 'I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgement of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me'. The judge is the one who has been judged in lieu of the believer. As mentioned above, such a connection between Christ the Judge and Christ the Saviour is absent from the Belgic Confession.

That the present author would wish for such an emphasis in the current context is, of course, an effect of the 'century of eschatology', of biblical scholars Johannes Weiß and Albert Schweitzer, and of systematic theologians Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth. In this century, the last things became first (Schwöbel 2000). The eschatological focus shifted from the *eschata*, via the *eschaton*, to the *eschatos*. Earlier generations of theologians showed great interest in the phenomena surrounding the end of the world, the coming of Christ and heaven and hell: the 'last things' or *eschata*. More and more, an awareness arose that the Christian message not only declares some end to the present world but, moreover, a qualitatively different reality: the Kingdom of God, the *eschaton*. But within the *eschaton*, Christ is the central figure. He is the '*eschatos*', the last man (1 Cor 15:45), on whom all of eschatology hinges.

The Christological concentration in large parts of 20th-century theology may well cohere with confusion concerning the concrete '*eschata*'. The 16th-century language of the 'horrible and dreadful [judgement] to wicked and evil people', followed by their receiving immortality, 'but only to be tormented in the eternal fire', understandably leads to confusion once one asks whether one's friendly neighbours, children or parents may be among them. For De Brès, the situation was clear, the wicked identifiable, as the hypocrites can be easily discerned from the godly (Article 29).

Still, De Brès's emphasis on ultimate justice being done remains an important aspect of Christian doctrine, a consolation, particularly for those who suffer at the hands of the cruel.

■ Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The addition of the article on the last judgement puts the article on civil government into perspective: the civil magistrate cannot bring the eschatological deliverance needed for the world.
2. Article 37 is stamped by a judicial focus: that Christ comes to judge is the main emphasis. The judgement takes place based on works. De Brès emphasises the separation between the elect and the ungodly, evil people.
3. The Belgic Confession gives a prominent place to conscience, which is the source of knowledge of one's salvation or damnation. This is not based on the biblical texts cited, and its pastoral results are questionable.
4. The Belgic Confession's focus on the salvation or damnation of the individual is not merely individualistic but lacks attention for the renewal of creation that is present in the Bible and that is more prominent in present-day eschatological reflection.

5. The biblical texts to which Article 37 of the Belgic Confession refers support the idea of a judgement based on works (e.g. the quotations from the Gospel of Matthew).
6. The texts De Brès quotes from the book of Revelation show a potential for comfort, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead.
7. In present-day theology, and by the present author, the need is felt more urgently than in De Brès's days to stress the identity of Christ the Judge and Christ the Saviour. The question is how 21st-century theology can accommodate concrete eschatological phenomena.

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Index

This collected work on the meaning and significance of the Belgic Confession is a good example of a solid confessional hermeneutic. It highlights the contemporary relevance of a confessional document dating from 1563. Both the relevance of the 37 articles of the Belgic Confession and its theological and temporal limitations are assessed in a congenial and honest way. Repeatedly, the question is posed and, to a certain extent, also answered about how the formulations of the Belgic Confession need to be updated and its content supplemented or even altered. This scholarly work demonstrates the relatedness of the Belgic Confession to trends in contemporary systematic theology and current topical ethical challenges, such as human flourishing, developing biotechnology and transhumanism. Ample attention is given to the different religious and socio-political contexts pertaining to the Belgic Confession.
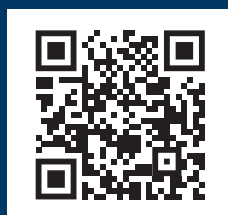
Relevant questions that are dealt with include the challenge posed by 'open theism', the question of how and to what extent the findings of theology and science can be harmonised, what common ground Christians have with other monotheists, and the way in which the biblical view of God and creation relates to the nowadays prevailing material worldview. In the closing chapters, challenging issues are addressed, such as the question of how to translate Reformed ecclesiology into the language of missional ecclesiology, retrieving the relevance of Article 36 on worldly authorities and, last but not least, how new avenues in eschatology provide useful insights to actualise Article 37.

This book exemplifies theology of retrieval as a whole. It stimulates the existential, respectful and thankful dialogue with this valuable confessional standard of many Reformed churches worldwide. After reading this book, one cannot reasonably persist with the idea that the Belgic Confession calls for an update, and is of no use for theological reflection of today.

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Focusing on a confession of the church is a fairly unique endeavour in the contemporary theology scene, as symbolics as a discipline is not particularly popular. The authors provide an extraordinarily detailed reading and interpretation of the Belgic Confession in this collection, addressing a stark gap in the theological discourse and positing the novelty of the research. This book provides recommended literature coupled with a striking level of academic detail, along with an antenna for the contemporary horizon and the challenges it faces, from South African and international contributors. One's hope is that the scholarly reception of this contemporary interpretation of the Belgic Confession may be widely engaged with, also from critical perspectives that may advance the study of confessions and their enduring significance.

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