

## LESSON 12

## Belgic Confession Article 21 The Work of Atonement

### **General:**

In this lesson we examine the confession concerning the full, unique sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the implications of this sacrifice for our own life.

### **1. The Three-fold Office of Christ**

Our Lord Jesus Christ was ordained and anointed to be the great *shepherd* of His flock.

Ezekiel 34:12, "As a shepherd seeks out His flock, when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so I will seek my sheep."

John 10:3, "I am the good Shepherd."

This "pastoral" ministry has three aspects:

- a) it is a *prophetic* ministry,  
John 10:3, "the sheep hear His *voice*"

As *Prophet* He has "fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption," Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12.

- b) it is a *priestly* ministry,  
John 10:11, "The good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."

As *Priest*, Christ has redeemed us by the one sacrifice of His body, see also Lord's Day 12.

- c) it is a *royal* ministry,  
John 10:28, "No one shall snatch them out of my hand."

As *King* He governs us by His Word and Spirit and defends and preserves us in the salvation obtained for us, see also: Lord's Day 12.

In Article 21, the Confession elaborates on the *heart* of Christ's ministry, the *priestly* work, visible especially in His one sacrifice for us on the cross of Golgotha (Hebrews 10:12).

We may in this respect note the following:

- a) the character of this Priesthood
- b) the exclusiveness of His suffering
- c) the sufficiency of His sacrifice.

## 2. Priest After the Order of Melchizedek

In the Scriptures we can discern *two* kinds of priesthoods:

- a) the priesthood of Aaron (Levi): the priesthood given under the Old Covenant to Israel, intended to work reconciliation through the ongoing sacrificial service in the tabernacle and the temple. This priesthood was received in hereditary fashion, and was important for the maintenance of the Covenant; it could not, however, *remove* sins.

Hebrews 7:11, "Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood . . . what further need would there then have been for another priest to rise after the order of Melchizedek?" [see also: Hebrews 10:4]

- b) the priesthood of Melchizedek: the priesthood which belonged to Melchizedek, King of Salem, in the days of Abraham, Genesis 14; Hebrews 7. This priesthood was not received by birth, but is of a more unique character and significance. Although there is disagreement on the exact significance of Melchizedek, the Reformed consensus seems to be that his priesthood relates to the original priesthood given to man at creation.

The point of Hebrews 7 is that although Christ is not of the tribe of Levi, He does indeed lawfully carry the title "priest" and actually fulfills a priesthood of a *higher* order than Aaron (Levi), having received it directly from God (not by birth), by "the power of an indestructible life" and holding it also eternally.

Psalm 110:4, "The Lord has sworn, and will not change His mind, you are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

Further consequence of this is that Christ's priesthood has abolished the Levitical priesthood. This is the greater riches of the New Covenant: only one Priest, holding His priesthood permanently and perfectly.

## 3. The Suffering of our Lord

The Heidelberg Catechism teaches us in Lord's Day 15 that Christ suffered all the time He was on earth, especially at the end of His life. His death on the cross is the *climax* and *conclusion* of His suffering, the actual sacrifice.

This suffering is *unique* and *incomparable*, because:

- a) He bore the *full* wrath of God against the sin of the *whole* human race.
- b) He suffered while being Himself completely innocent. It was a payment or "satisfaction" for our sins. To do this, He became *curse* (Galatians 3:13) and was made to be *sin* (2 Corinthians 5: 21).

Since He died in our place ("substitutionary atonement"), we now by legal "imputation" receive His blessing and righteousness.

Christ's suffering and final sacrifice took place on the basis of and according to the given revelation of God,

Isaiah 53:6, "And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

See also: Genesis 3:15; Psalms 22 and 69; Zechariah 13:7, etc.

The distinction has often been made between:

- a) Christ's *active obedience*: all that He did positively during His life on earth to fulfil the requirements of the Law (Matthew 5:17; Romans 8:4).
- b) Christ's *passive obedience*: bearing the penalty of the Law in all His sufferings and subsequent sacrifice (eternal and temporal death) on the cross (1 Peter 2:24).

This distinction is meant especially to prevent the misinterpretation that only Christ's work on the cross has a redeeming and meriting value, and that we yet ourselves have to fulfil the Law in order to receive the full benefit of His Cross.

#### **4. The Sufficiency of His Sacrifice**

The Confession stresses that the one sacrifice of Christ is complete and therefore sufficient payment for *all* our sins. Christ is a perfect Saviour, and we may not need *add* to His work in any way. The Name "Jesus" (Saviour) already indicates that in Him *alone* lies full salvation. Therefore we reject:

- a) the merit of (additional) personal "good works"
- b) the merit of the (abundant) good works of "saints."

We receive in Christ all that is necessary for salvation, both *justification* (forgiveness of sins) and *sanctification* (renewal of life by His Spirit and Word).

Christ is in all respects, according to His divine appointment and birth, on the basis of Scriptural revelation and requirements which He excellently fulfilled, and by His perfect ministry on earth, our *one and only Redeemer*.

Acts 4:12, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

**QUESTIONS (Lesson 12):**

1. What is the three-fold office of Christ?
2. Which priesthoods does the Bible know?
3. Why is Christ's priesthood the most glorious?
4. Why is Christ's suffering unique and incomparable?
5. What is the difference between "active" and "passive" obedience?
6. What is "substitutionary atonement"?
7. What do we mean by the "sufficiency" of His sacrifice?

**ASSIGNMENT:**

Memory Work: Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers, 29, 31, and 37.

## ARTICLE 22

### OUR JUSTIFICATION THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST

We believe that, in order that we may obtain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith. This faith embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, makes Him our own, and does not seek anything besides Him. For it must necessarily follow, either that all we need for our salvation is not in Jesus Christ or, if it is all in Him, that one who has Jesus Christ through faith, has complete salvation. It is, therefore, a terrible blasphemy to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something else is needed besides Him; for the conclusion would then be that Christ is only half a Saviour.

Therefore we rightly say with Paul that *we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works of law*. Meanwhile, strictly speaking, we do not mean that faith as such justifies us, for faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ our righteousness; He imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works as He has done for us and in our place. Therefore Jesus Christ is our righteousness, and faith is the instrument that keeps us with Him in the communion of all His benefits. When those benefits have become ours, they are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.

## ARTICLE 23

### OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD

We believe that our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake and that therein our righteousness before God consists, as David and Paul teach us. They pronounce *a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works*. The apostle also says that we are *justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*.

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

This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities and to give us confidence in drawing near to God, freeing our conscience of fear, terror, and dread, so that we do not follow the example of our first father, Adam, who trembling tried to hide and covered himself with fig leaves. For indeed, if we had to appear before God, relying – be it ever so little – on ourselves or some other creature, (woe be to us!) we would be consumed. Therefore everyone must say with David, *O LORD, enter not into judgment with Thy servant, for no man living is righteous before Thee*.