

LESSON 4

Belgic Confession Articles 3-7 The Scriptures

General:

In this lesson we confess the Word of God to be the inspired infallible Truth and examine its place and function in the life of the believers.

1. Revelation

Since the *Bible* (= Greek, *Biblia* – books of the Old and New Testament) is the written account of God's *revelation*, we must first understand what the word "revelation" means.

Revelation = uncovering, making known

We speak of God's *self-revelation*, because He made Himself known by His deeds and words.

This "revelation" did not take place all at once, but shows a gradual process, finally culminating in Jesus Christ, Who has fully manifested the Name of the Father (John 17). Therefore we can speak of the *history of revelation*. It is important always to ask: at what time in the history of salvation is something said or did something happen? (context).

God has revealed Himself in many ways (Hebrews 1:1,2):

- a) in personal appearances (on Mount Horeb, "the Angel of the Lord")
- b) by prophecy: the casting of the Lot (Urim and Thummim), dreams and visions, etc.
- c) by miraculous deeds: passage through the Red Sea and the Jordan
- d) in Jesus Christ and the apostolic ministry.

God did not reveal Himself in this fashion to all peoples, but gave His Gospel only to those whom He had chosen in His Divine and sovereign pleasure,

Psalm 147:19, "He declares His Word to Jacob, His statutes and ordinances to Israel; He has not dealt thus with any other nation, they do not know his ordinances."

The Canons of Dort also stress this in the first Head of Doctrine, paragraph 3, "God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message *to whom He wills and when He wills* . . ."

It is therefore a great privilege and obligation to receive the revelation of God. The Lord Jesus Christ commanded His disciples to make known His commandments to all nations (Matthew 28).

2. Inspiration

Since the Bible contains God's self-revelation, His eternal counsel and will concerning our redemption, it is itself also revelation. We therefore call the Bible the "inspired Word of God."

Inspiration – given (in) by the Spirit of God.

2 Peter 1:21, ". . . because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men, moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God."

2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is inspired by God . . ."

The prophets and apostles consistently maintained that their words were *fully* God's Word. Christ Himself accepted the Old Testament as Divine Truth.

We believe that God chose and used men, not mechanically as robots, but with their own talents (style), abilities and personalities, yet guided them in such a way that His Word was infallibly formulated and passed on. We call this: organic inspiration.

We receive all these books of the Old and New Testament as being fully the Word of God through:

- a) the catholic testimony of the Church
- b) the effective witness of the Holy Spirit
- c) the clear evidence in themselves.

3. The Canon

The Word "canon" means: "rule" or "guide" (norm), and we speak of "canonical" books as those books which are valid for the "regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith" (Article 5).

The Old Testament was recognized as "canonical" already in the third century before Christ and strongly defended during the times of the Maccabees. A Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, "the Septuagint," was known already in the second century before Christ.

The New Testament canon (as we know it) was defended by Athanasius already in 367 A.D. and adopted at the Synod of Hippo in 393 A.D. (see also: Council of Carthage, Lesson 20).

There were also many other "religious" works which were not accepted as "canonical." These are called the *Apocryphal* books because:

- a) their origin and significance was obscure (conflicting with the canonical books)
- b) they were carefully "stored away" to avoid usage in the worship services.

The Roman Catholic version, the Vulgate, contains a number of these apocryphal books. These books may be used to "take instruction from," but cannot confirm or detract from the authority of the "holy books" (Article 6).

4. The Characteristics of the Bible

- a) *Clarity*: the Bible can be clearly understood in its general contents and basic message, even by children, Matthew 11:25. This does not mean that there are no difficult passages which are "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16) and that there need be no interpreters (Acts 8:31).
- b) *Sufficiency*: the Bible "fully contains the Will of God" and all that we must know for salvation is included in it, Article 7. The Church may not nor need add to the given revelation (Revelation 22:18, 19).
- c) *Necessity*: the Scriptures must be known and examined for salvation for these alone contain the witness of Jesus Christ (John 5:39).

5. Illumination

Although the "inspiration" ceased when the Bible was completed (Revelation 22:18, 19), we still daily need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to understand the Scriptures. We call this: illumination, Romans 8:14 (2 Corinthians 4:3-6).

QUESTIONS (Lesson 4):

1. What is the meaning of the word "revelation"?
2. Why do we speak of the "history of revelation"?
3. Explain that God revealed Himself in "many ways".
4. What is "inspiration"?
5. What is the difference between canonical and apocryphal books?
6. What are the characteristics of the Bible?
7. What is "illumination"?

ASSIGNMENT:

Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 19.

LESSON 4 APPENDIX

The Infallibility of the Bible

Especially in our time there is a growing controversy about the trustworthiness of the Bible as being the true and complete Word of God, and, therefore, in every respect authoritative for our life. If perhaps for centuries all Christians held to the view that the Bible was infallible, such is presently no longer the case.

Without attempting to be complete, we can perhaps distinguish between three major opinions:

- a) The viewpoint that the Bible is *fully* the inspired Word of God, and therefore is inerrant in every respect, normative for all times
- b) the viewpoint that the Bible is only infallible in matters pertaining to the doctrine and the history of *salvation*, as a rule of faith and conduct, but "errant" in other matters, such as history, geography, and science. Many so-called "evangelicals" today hold this view (e.g., S.T. Davis, *The Debate about the Bible*, The Westminster Press, 1977)
- c) the viewpoint that the Bible does *not at all* contain God's Word about Himself (self-revelation) but rather man's time-bound witness about God. This witness may be interesting and instructive, but is certainly not normative for people today.

It is a common opinion in our times that we may not exclusively identify the Bible with "the Word of God." The Bible is said to contain many human presuppositions about God and various "myths" which perhaps contain some truth, but are nevertheless only myths. Especially the first chapters of the Bible (Genesis 1-11) are today considered myths while real history starts with Abraham. Moreover, the Bible was written in its own time, and not only has human knowledge increased vastly since then, but also many decisive changes have come about. The conclusion of many is therefore: the Bible is not *normative*.

In contrast to this, the Reformed Churches confess that "all these books" are "holy and canonical," and we "*believe without any doubt all things contained in them*" (Belgic Confession, Article 5). This is the viewpoint described under "a". We therefore reject any *Bible criticism* as being contrary to our confession.

We do, however, recognize that right of "textual criticism," i.e., the necessary study whether a certain text has been correctly established with a view to the most trustworthy manuscripts available. We also emphasize the fact that we must always consider the historical *context* in which a Scripture passage is placed. Nevertheless, we hold the Bible to be infallible and therefore trustworthy *in every respect*.

ARTICLE 8

GOD IS ONE IN ESSENCE, YET DISTINGUISHED IN THREE PERSONS

According to this truth and this Word of God, we believe in one only God, who is one single essence, in which are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties; namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is the cause, origin, and beginning of all things visible and invisible. The Son is the Word, the wisdom, and the image of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Nevertheless, God is not by this distinction divided into three, since the Holy Scriptures teach us that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each has His personal existence, distinguished by Their properties; but in such a way that these three persons are but one only God.

It is therefore evident that the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father, and likewise the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Nevertheless, these persons thus distinguished are not divided, nor intermixed; for the Father has not assumed our flesh and blood, neither has the Holy Spirit, but the Son only. The Father has never been without His Son, or without His Holy Spirit. For They are all three co-eternal and co-essential. There is neither first nor last; for They are all three one, in truth, in power, in goodness, and in mercy.

ARTICLE 9

SCRIPTURE PROOF OF THIS DOCTRINE

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

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

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

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