

# DAILY MEDITATIONS ON THE BELGIC CONFESSION

by pastors of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America

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**JUL**  
**Articles 21-23**

## Article 21: The Satisfaction of Christ, Our Only High Priest, For Us.

*We believe that Jesus Christ is ordained with an oath to be an everlasting High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek; and that He hath presented Himself in our behalf before the Father to appease His wrath by His full satisfaction, by offering Himself on the tree of the cross and pouring out His precious blood to purge away our sins, as the prophets had foretold. For it is written: He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed. He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and numbered with the transgressors, and condemned by Pontius Pilate as a malefactor, though he had first declared Him innocent. Therefore, He restored that which He took not away, and suffered, the just for the unjust, as well in His body as in His soul, feeling the terrible punishment which our sins had merited; insomuch that His sweat became like unto drops of blood falling on the ground. He called out, My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? and hath suffered all this for the remission of our sins.*

*Wherefore we justly say with the apostle Paul, that we know nothing but Jesus Christ, and Him crucified; we count all things but loss and dung for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord, in whose wounds we find all manner of consolation. Neither is it necessary to seek or invent any other means of being reconciled to God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which believers are made perfect forever. This is also the reason why He was called by the angel of God, **Jesus**, that is to say, **Savior**, because He would save His people from their sins.*

**July 2 – Christ the Only Everlasting High Priest**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Hebrews 3:1 “...consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus;”

The holy God has ordained that He should be approached through a priest. The first man named a priest in Scripture is Melchizedek (Gen 14:18). Often the heads of households functioned as priests (Job 1:5). Later God instituted an order of priests, the sons of Aaron of the tribe of Levi. Throughout Israel’s history, God’s people relied on priests to officiate in the tabernacle and the temple. The task of a priest was to act as a representative of the people to bring the people into fellowship with God (Heb 5:1).

The work of a priest was threefold. First, on the altar of burnt offering the priest offered sacrifices to cover the sins of the people. Of course, the sins of the people were only covered ceremonially. However, the requirement of blood atonement reminded the people of the holiness of God and of the need for satisfaction for sin. Second, the priest took some of the burning coals from the altar of burnt offering, mixed them with a carefully prepared mixture of spices and then offered the mixture on the altar of incense. A cloud of sweet smelling smoke called incense would ascend to heaven. While he offered incense the priest interceded for the people. Thus incense was symbolic of intercessory prayer. Third, on the basis of the sacrifice offered and after the intercessory prayer, the priest would bless the people in the name of God.

God gave priests in the Old Testament to prepare His people for the coming of Christ who would, as the everlasting High Priest, perform a threefold work. Christ offered one final sacrifice on the cross; Christ intercedes for us in heaven at God’s Right Hand, and Christ blesses us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places. In Art. 21, the focus is on Christ’s priestly work of atonement. The title is “The Satisfaction of Christ, Our Only High Priest, For Us.” Art. 26 will deal with Christ’s intercession which we shall study in future meditations.

One very important point, often missed today, is that Christ died for, intercedes for and blesses the very same people. There is an essential unity in Christ’s priestly work. Christ makes this clear in His well known “high priestly prayer” where He says, “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine” (John 17:9). If Christ does not pray for every single human being, He did not die for every single human being, and therefore He neither procures nor bestows blessings upon every single human being. To teach that Christ only prays for some but that He died for all is to imagine an impossible division in Christ’s priestly work.

In the New Testament there is no longer an order of priests, but only one High Priest, Jesus Christ Himself. The priesthood of Jesus Christ is a major theme of the epistle to the Hebrews. In that epistle, the inspired writer proves the superiority, uniqueness and permanence of Christ’s priesthood by comparing Christ to the Old Testament priests. Therefore the priests of the Roman Catholic Church and the priests of the Mormon cult must be rejected as imposters.

Do you know this one, only, everlasting High Priest? Trust no other priest but Him!

**July 3 – Christ’s Melchizedekian Priesthood**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Psalm 110:4 “The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.”

In Scripture there are only two orders of the priesthood, the priesthood after the order of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi; and the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. Christ was not, and never could be, a priest after the former order, because He was not born of Levi’s tribe but of Judah’s (Heb 7:13-14). Indeed, since in the Old Testament the priests were from Levi and the kings were from Judah, it was not possible to be simultaneously king and priest. Yet God promised a Saviour who would be priest (Psa 110:4), king (Gen 49:10), as well as prophet (Deut 18:18).

The writer to the Hebrews takes a relatively obscure prophecy in the Psalms and from it expounds the priesthood of Christ according to the order of Melchizedek. In so doing, he proves the superiority of Christ over the Old Testament priesthood. The reader should study carefully Hebrews 7.

There are many reasons for the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ over the Levitical or Aaronic priesthood. First, Melchizedek precedes Levi and Aaron in time. He appears in Genesis 14:18-20 after Abraham’s slaughter of the kings and successful recovery of the captives, including his nephew Lot. Second, Abraham recognizes Melchizedek’s superiority by giving him a tenth of the spoils of war, and in a way—this is the argument of the inspired writer to Hebrews—Levi (who was in Abraham’s loins) gave tithes to Melchizedek (Heb 7:4-9). Third, since Melchizedek is—at least on the pages of Scripture, for he disappears as suddenly as he appeared—“Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God, abideth a priest continually” (Heb 7:3) he is a fitting picture of the real Melchizedek, of whom the historical Melchizedek was a picture. Thus the Levitical or Aaronic priesthood was temporary and imperfect; the Melchizedekian priesthood is eternal and perfect (Heb 7:8,24). Fourth, the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ is significant because He is ordained with an oath to be an everlasting High Priest. In Scripture, God’s promise or oath is always superior to the Law. The fact that God swears an oath in Psalm 110 *after* He has ordained the Levitical or Aaronic priesthood shows that the law and its priesthood would pass away (Heb 7:15-18,28).

How blessed we are to have a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Unlike the Old Testament priests, Christ does not die but is made a priest “after the power of an endless life” (Heb 7:16). Since Christ never dies, He is never replaced and His priesthood does not pass on to successors (Heb 7:23-24). This is in accordance with God’s solemn oath: “The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Psa 110:4). God will not repent or change His mind. Christ will be a priest forever with a priesthood which shall have no end. Besides this, Christ, again unlike the Old Testament priests, is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens” (Heb 7:26). Therefore, Christ can offer one sacrifice for sins forever, unlike former priests who had to offer ineffectual sacrifices repeatedly (Heb 7:27; 9:25-26; 10:11-14).

One perfect High Priest; one perfect sacrifice; one perfected people!

**July 4 – Christ Presenting Himself Before the Father**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

John 10:18 “No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself...”

Sometimes we think of Jesus as a victim upon whom God inflicted terrible sufferings. Some have scoffed at Christianity, calling it “slaughterhouse religion.” More recently, certain wicked men—even within Evangelical Christianity—have accused God of “cosmic child abuse.” But all such objections to the Gospel of the cross are based on a deliberate refusal to see that what Christ suffered was *voluntary*.

When we see the awful sufferings of Christ in Scripture, let us never lose sight of that great truth. Christ was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, but only because He willingly consented to His arrest and gave Himself into the hands of His captors (John 18:4-9). Christ was beaten, spat upon and mocked, but remember His words in Isaiah 50:6: “I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.” Christ was arraigned before the Jews and then Pontius Pilate, but only because He Himself permitted it. Christ was crucified and suffered the indignities and agonies of the cross, but only because He personally embraced those sufferings as part of the will of God. All of this He sums up in John 10:17-18: “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.” Indeed, Christ did not actually die until the moment determined by Himself. He could not have died one second earlier or later than the one appointed by the Father and to which He willingly submitted.

Art. 21 explains this in these words: “He hath presented Himself in our behalf before the Father to appease His wrath by His full satisfaction.” The Son of God, as it were, appeared before the Father and declared, “Here I am, send me.” And we must be abundantly clear that the Son of God knew exactly the import of His words: “Send me, Father, and I will be born of a virgin, in humble and miserable circumstances. Send me, Father, and I will grow up in relative obscurity and poverty. Send me, Father, and I will preach thy Gospel, do good and keep thy Law, under which I will be born. Send me, Father, and I will be rejected by many, despised and abhorred by men, betrayed, denied and finally put to death. Send me, Father, and I will submit to the indignities of arrest, false imprisonment, a wicked, unjust, public flogging, rejection by the people in favour of a murderer, and finally the agony of crucifixion. Send me, Father, and I will bear in my own body the full weight of thy wrath against the sins of which my elect are guilty.” The book of Hebrews sums it up, quoting Psalm 40:7, “Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God” (Heb 10:7).

Something legal happened when Christ presented Himself before the Father. The guilt of all our sins was transferred to the account of God’s Son. He undertook full responsibility for what we had done and did what we had left undone and had refused to do.

What amazing love is this! Praise Christ, our self-giving, self-sacrificing Saviour!

**July 5 – Feeling the Terrible Punishment Which Our Sins Had Merited**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Isaiah 53:10 “...it pleased the LORD to bruise Him...”

To understand the death of Christ, we must see that Christ did not suffer merely at the hands of ungodly men. There is no doubt that Christ’s physical sufferings were excruciating, a word which comes from the Latin word *crux* for cross. Crucifixion was an extremely painful, humiliating and slow way to die. The Romans developed it as a form of execution to terrorize those whom they conquered. No Roman citizen could be crucified. Indeed, the words ‘crucify’ or ‘cross’ were not uttered in polite conversation. When the readers of the Gospel accounts read the words “they crucified him” (Mark 15:25) they knew exactly what that meant.

But we would miss the Gospel of the cross if we did not see beyond the physical anguish of our Saviour caused by the contradiction of sinners (Heb. 12:3). There have been various theories about what Christ’s death on the cross means, but many of them fall short. Some have seen Christ’s death as an inspiring example to moral courage, the death of a martyr for a good cause. The lesson they draw from Christ’s death is that we must be willing to suffer bravely for our principles. There is truth to that, of course (I Pet 2:21, 4:1, etc). But there is more to it than that. Others have seen Christ’s death as the way to receive inspiration to love God and our neighbour. The sufferings of Christ are supposed to melt our heart in love for Him. This is the *moral influence* theory. This like many errors has a grain of truth to it (II Cor 5:14). Still others teach that by the cross, Christ has conquered the devil and the power of sin, the so-called *Christus Victor* theory. While it is true that Christ has conquered the devil as promised (Gen 3:15; Col 2:15), there is more to the atonement than that. A fourth view is the *governmental view*. This is the view that Christ died on the cross as an example of the justice of God. The idea is that God punished Christ instead of punishing us to “make an example of Him.” This is what God will do to you if you do not repent! Because Christ has suffered instead of you, God can be just in forgiving you.

But do not be fooled by these false views of the atonement. None of them is the truth, although they all have an element of truth in them. The truth is *penal substitutionary* atonement. Penal means “pertaining to punishment.” A country might have a “penal code,” which is the punishments mandated by law for certain crimes. A prisoner might be sent to a “penal colony” or be incarcerated in a “penal institution.” Those are places of punishment. Art. 21 teaches us that Christ “[felt] the terrible punishment which our sins had merited.” The second word in “penal substitutionary” refers to the fact that Christ was the Substitute, that He stood in the place of sinners and endured the punishment which those sinners should have endured.

The wonder of the sufferings of the cross is this: they were inflicted on Christ by the Father who punished His Son to the full extent of the Law in our place. The punishment He felt was not a general punishment but the punishment which our sins merited.

Thus the prophet can write: “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:5,6). When we contemplate the sufferings of Christ, we must not think abstractly. We must remember our own sins—our lies, our pride, our anger, our envy. Those were the sins which brought Him to Calvary.

**July 6 – Satisfaction; Atonement; Redemption; Reconciliation; and Propitiation**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Isaiah 53:11 “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied...”

To understand what Christ accomplished by His sufferings and death, we must examine the rich language of the Bible. All too often this is not done, which leads to confusion and error about the cross of our Saviour. The more we rightly understand what Christ has done for us, the more we are filled with gratitude.

Consider this illustration. A man and his wife are enjoying a pleasant stroll along the pier. Suddenly, the man says to his wife, “Darling, I want to show you how much I love you.” And he jumps into the sea and drowns. Would the wife view that as an act of love? Of course not: she would view that as a senseless waste of life. But if that same man jumped in front of a gunman to save his wife, that would be a heroic act even if the man was killed in his act of courage. If the death of Christ was not necessary and if it did not accomplish anything, then how can we glory in it? The Bible tells us that the death of Christ was both necessary and powerfully effective. It does that in the various words it uses to denote the sufferings of Christ.

First, the death of Christ was real satisfaction. To satisfy means to make a full payment of a debt so that the creditor receives the amount he is owed. We owe a debt to the justice of God which we cannot even begin to pay. Jesus satisfied God by paying on our behalf. “He shall see of the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied” (Isa 53:11). Art. 21 speaks of “appeasing His [the Father’s] wrath by His full satisfaction.”

Second, the death of Christ was atonement. To atone means to cover over by means of a sacrifice. Many times that word is used with respect to the sacrifices of the Old Testament, for example, “he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him” (Lev 1:4). What the sacrificial lambs did typically, Christ did actually by shedding His blood on the cross.

Third, the death of Christ was redemption. To redeem means to release from slavery by the payment of a price, a ransom. The only ransom costly enough to redeem lost sinners is the life of the Son of God. “Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things ... But with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:18-19).

Fourth, the death of Christ was reconciliation. To reconcile is to restore parties at variance with one another to fellowship, by the removal of the cause of their estrangement. Quite simply, reconciliation is the restoration of a broken friendship. Christ reconciled us to God by removing our sin. “When we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom 5:10).

Fifth, the death of Christ was propitiation or an appeasing of the wrath of God by means of a sacrifice to cover over the sin. The anger of God was turned away from us by the sacrifice of Christ. “God... sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

Therefore we can say that the death of Christ is a satisfaction which really satisfied the justice of God; an atonement which really atoned and covered over our sins; a redemption which really delivered us from death, sin, hell and the devil; a reconciliation which really brings us into fellowship with God; and a propitiation which really turns away God’s wrath from us.

That is the rich meaning of our Saviour’s death.

**July 7 – A Particular, Effectual Atonement**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Did Christ die for everybody; did Christ die for those who are never saved; or did Christ die only for God’s elect people? The answer to that question is determined by more than numbers—“all” versus “some” or “many”—but depends on what the death of Christ actually *is*.

In the providence of God, this has become a debate between Limited and Unlimited Atonement. But that terminology is unfortunate. It leads one to imagine that the Reformed, who believe in “Limited Atonement,” are limiting the atonement while the Arminians, who believe in “Unlimited or Universal Atonement,” are not limiting the atonement. The opposite is true.

Christ’s death is real satisfaction, atonement, redemption, reconciliation and propitiation. If that is true, the question about the extent of the atonement should be easy to answer. The Arminians claim that Christ redeemed all men without exception, that God was in the world reconciling it to Himself and that Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world (see I Tim 2:6; II Cor 5:19; I John 2:2). But do not let Arminianism fool you. If Christ redeemed all men without exception but not all men are not delivered from sin and the devil, then His redemption was worthless because it did not redeem! If God was reconciling the world to Himself—which according to II Cor 5:19 means “not imputing their trespasses unto them”—but not all are brought into His fellowship but many perish as His enemies, then His reconciliation did not reconcile! And if Christ propitiated God with respect to the sins of the whole world but some still bear God’s wrath in eternal hell, then Christ’s propitiation did not propitiate! It is the Arminian who limits the atonement of Christ by robbing it of its efficacy and therefore of its meaning.

The answer of Arminianism is that Christ did these things for everyone *but we must accept it to make it real for us*. Thus we have the Christian cliché of “accepting Jesus as your own and personal Saviour.” However, the Bible does not speak in those terms. “We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom 5:10); “Christ hath redeemed us” (Gal 3:13). “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood” (Rev 1:5). The Bible is clear: Christ either redeemed His people effectually by His death, saving all those for whom He died, or Christ redeemed no one. There is no merely potential or possible atonement in Scripture.

The great objection of Arminianism is that the Bible says that Christ died for “all” or for the “world.” Arminians assume that these terms mean everybody, the entire human race without exception. But this is not true. In Scripture, the word “world” rarely means all without exception (John 7:4, 12:19, 15:18-19, 16:20). It is a word used to denote all nations. Similarly, the term “all men” means all in a specific group and rarely means everyone without exception (Mark 1:37, 11:32; John 11:48; Acts 2:45, 4:21, 19:19, 21:28). This is not unusual language even in English. Consider these examples: “The world was shocked by the earthquake.” “Does everyone have a copy of the book?” “There is a lunch for everybody on the table.” “I do not want anyone to be late.” “Everybody was at church.” Context determines meaning.

The beautiful truth of Scripture is this: Christ died for all His people; He redeemed His sheep; He purchased His bride; and He redeemed us from every nation. He did so effectually for all those for whom He died and He saves to the uttermost all those who believe in Him.



**July 8 – Christ’s Agony in Gethsemane**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Matthew 26:38 “...My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death...”

For every Christian, the sufferings of Christ are fascinating. We love to hear how our Lord Jesus Christ gave Himself for our sins. We love to ponder all the details and to marvel at His wondrous love. Although Christ suffered His whole life, we might say that His sufferings begin to peak as He reached the point of Gethsemane.

Gethsemane means oil press. It was an enclosed garden on the Mount of Olives. Jesus and His disciples knew the place. How fitting, as the Son of God was about to be pressed with the dreadful, crushing burden of God’s wrath, that He would come to Gethsemane—the oil press! Christ came to that location for two main reasons. First, it was a place of refuge, a place of seclusion and He needed time to be alone with His Father in prayer. Second, Christ knew that the place was familiar to Judas Iscariot, His betrayer (John 18:2). Christ made no attempt to hide from Judas or to evade arrest. He was waiting for Judas when the betrayer arrived with his mob of soldiers. “Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me” (Matt 26:45-46).

When Christ entered Gethsemane for the last time, a change came over Him. Christ, the beloved Son, who was always so calm and reposed, began to tremble with fear. A great and holy dread came upon Him, which we must try to understand. The Gospel writers describe Christ in very moving words: “[He] began to be sorrowful and very heavy”; “[He] began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy”; He was “in an agony” (Matt 26:37; Mark 14:33; Luke 22:44). Christ Himself describes how He is feeling to His disciples: “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death...” (Matt 26:38). Luke tells us that “his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). In Hebrews we read, “Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared” (Heb 5:7).

Was Christ, who before this had so often spoken in solemn terms about His upcoming death in Jerusalem, now suddenly afraid to die? Had His courage left Him? Was He less courageous—I speak as a fool—than others who had suffered the horrible death of crucifixion? Not at all! Christ was afraid of something worse—infinity worse—than physical death. Christ feared the cup. That was the focus of His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt... O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done” (Matt 26:39,42). In Gethsemane, Christ was wrestling with the horror of drinking the cup. He knew what was in the cup and He shrank back in dread from the contents of the cup. In Scripture, a cup is an appointed portion of something, either of blessing or of wrath. “In the hand of the LORD there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture; and he poureth out of the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them” (Psa 75:8).

Now *that* cup was handed to Christ. In Gethsemane, Christ took it and began His last steps to the cross where He would drink every last drop of it.

**July 9 – Christ Condemned Though Declared Innocent**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

John 19:6 “...Take ye him, and crucify him: for I find no fault in him.”

After His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ suffered the indignity of a trial. His trial took place in several stages. First, He was questioned by Annas, the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest (John 18:13). Then He was arraigned before the entire Sanhedrin in Caiaphas’ house in the middle of the night. Multiple laws of Jewish jurisprudence were transgressed that night because Christ’s enemies were desperate to convict Christ and kill Him. After trying threats and intimidation and using the testimony of false witnesses, Caiaphas demanded that Christ answer a question under oath: “I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God” (Matt. 26:63). Christ responded truthfully that He was. The Sanhedrin, having rejected Christ as the Son of God for some time, now officially pronounced Jesus guilty of blasphemy: “Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death” (Matt 26:65-66). Then Jesus’ enemies unleashed their fury upon Him: “they [did] spit in his face, and buffeted him” (v67). All this Jesus bore patiently, not speaking a word!

Condemned by the religious leaders, Jesus was taken to Pilate to be tried before the civil powers. At this time only the Romans had the authority to put a person to death. The Sanhedrin needed some excuse to have Pilate, the Roman governor, execute Jesus. Pilate was not convinced. Having examined Jesus, Pilate declared repeatedly that He was innocent: “I find in him no fault at all” (John 18:38); “I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him” (John 19:4); “Take ye him, and crucify him: for I find no fault in him” (John 19:6). Pilate even tries to absolve himself of the guilt of unlawfully sentencing Jesus to death by washing his hands symbolically before the people. “I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it” (Matt 27:24). Others testified to the innocence of Jesus: Pilate’s wife (Matt. 27:19); Judas Iscariot (Matt 27:4); one of the thieves who was crucified alongside Jesus (Luke 23:41) and the centurion whose soldiers crucified Jesus (Luke 23:47).

Art. 21 takes note of this: “[He was] condemned by Pontius Pilate as a malefactor, *though he had first declared Him innocent.*” But why was such a trial necessary? First, God would have the innocence of His Son thoroughly examined and publicly testified. No one was able to find the least fault in Jesus. This was necessary because He was our Substitute who must be “a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet 1:19). Second, God would confront the powers of that day, both the religious and civil powers, as well as the common people, with the question: “What will ye do with Jesus which is called Christ?” No one can escape that question, although Pilate desperately tried to do so. And third, and most significant, God Himself condemned Jesus, using sinful men as His instruments. When Jesus heard those words, “He is worthy of death” and “Take ye Him and crucify Him,” Jesus heard in His own consciousness the terrible sentence of death coming from God Himself.

As Jesus stood before God He was bearing the sins of all His people whom He represented. Therefore the only fitting verdict was guilty. Guilty of all the sins of Thy people! Guilty of our sins!

**July 10 – Christ Wounded and Bruised**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Isaiah 53:5 “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities...”

From Pilate’s judgment hall, Christ made His way to the place of execution on the hill of Calvary. Before crucifixion, the condemned man was scourged. Sometimes, a Roman scourging was so severe that the victim died. A cruel whip lacerated Jesus’ back, and the soldiers added to Christ’s suffering and indignity by mocking His kingship with a crown of thorns, bowing in contempt before Him, beating Him and spitting in His face! Then upon His bleeding back they laid a heavy piece of wood. Our Saviour had to carry the instrument on which He Himself would be crucified. When He could carry the burden no longer, they forced a man, Simon of Cyrene, to carry it for Him. When they reached the hill, the soldiers began their grisly work, pounding nails into His hands and feet and hoisting Him up on the cross. And there He hung for six dreadful hours, in excruciating agony, from nine in the morning to three in the afternoon while His enemies looked on until darkness descended upon the scene.

Isaiah the prophet, writing centuries before the events took place, describes the sufferings of our Saviour in vivid language. First, there are words which speak of severe injury. Stricken! Smitten! Oppressed! Afflicted! Bruised! Wounded! The servant of Jehovah received one dreadful blow after another, each one more crushing than the former. The imagery in Isaiah 52-53 is of one beaten so severely that men can barely recognize Him; of one whose sufferings are so awful that men will turn away their faces in horror at the sight (Isa 52:14, 53:3). Second, there are words which speak of an intolerably heavy burden, a burden designed to crush a man under its weight. The suffering of Jesus was suffering which almost overwhelmed and engulfed the Servant of Jehovah, the Messiah. “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows...” (Isa 53:4). “The LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (v6). Never in the history of the world did any carry a load as heavy as this man. Third, there are words which describe the effect of this suffering upon the Saviour. We saw already how the anticipation of this suffering affected Jesus in Gethsemane. Now, on the cross, He feels acutely every blow, every wound, every laceration of His flesh, the agonizing thirst, the oppressive heat and the torment which pierces His very heart and soul with sorrow. He is afflicted, a word which means bowed down, humbled, made low (v7). Verse 11 speaks of the travail of His soul. To suffer there was grievous toil, hard labor which exhausted Him physically and emotionally as His soul was poured out unto death.

But the physical torment was only the beginning of Christ’s suffering. If mere men had stretched forth their hands against Him, He would not have felt such anguish. The horror of Calvary for the Son of God was this: *God* bruised Him; *God* crushed Him; *God* punished Him for our sins. “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him...” (v10). When Christ looked beyond the Jews and the Romans, He saw the hand of His Father. That hand was not gentle; that hand did not spare Him; that hand dealt Him crushing blow after crushing blow.

And yet the Saviour did not complain, but submitted Himself to the righteous judgment of the Father. He knew that God was just and holy, and He loved the one who bruised Him.

Isaiah says that it was the “chastisement of our peace” (v5). We deserved that punishment and that punishment brought us peace, peace with God and eternal life.

**July 11 – Forsaken for the Remission of Our Sins**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Matthew 27:46 “...My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

From the depths of Christ’s agonies came the cry of abandonment: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” These words spoken by Christ from the cross are among the most profound, mysterious and sacred in Scripture. The Son forsaken by the Father! What could this mean? How could this be possible? What is its significance?

We must remember the events of the cross. For three hours, Jesus had hung on the cross as a spectacle before men; and men had been active in mocking Him. It was not enough for His enemies that they had brought Him to the cross. They gathered like bloodthirsty wolves to growl at Him. “He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him” (Matt 27:42). Even the two thieves—one of whom would later repent and be forgiven by Jesus (Luke 23:43)—mocked Him (Matt 27:44). But the blasphemous chatter at the cross ended when God plunged the earth into darkness for three hours (Matt 27:45). This was a miraculous darkness which lasted from high noon until three o’clock, when the sun was normally at its hottest. During those three hours of darkness, God was judging sin and the Sinbearer, Jesus Christ. Judgment came to Calvary that day in the form of thick, impenetrable, oppressive darkness. That darkness was upon Jesus Christ because He was the object of the righteous and holy judgment of God against all the sins of God’s people. Only after Jesus had purged our sins and exhausted the wrath of God against our sins, did the light return.

It was as Jesus plumbed the depths of that darkness—the outer darkness of hell itself—and just before He emerged from it, that He cried with a loud voice the words of abandonment. At this point, Christ was being crushed by the heavy hand of God; the billows of God’s wrath, like a raging ocean of fire, were flooding and overwhelming Him; Jesus was tasting, drinking and emptying the bitter cup which God had given Him. At that point, inexpressive horror gripped Christ’s soul. God had forsaken Him. In that horror, Christ called out in agony, seeking for fellowship with His God: “My God, my God...” But there was no fellowship possible. God did not answer His Son with His favour. Our Mediator, who had always known and enjoyed communion with His Father, who was the object of the Father’s delight, who dwelled eternally in the Father’s bosom, was now without the presence of God’s love.

This does not mean that there was suddenly a schism in the being of the Trinity. This does not mean either that the Father now hated His Son. The Father loved the Son even when He did not spare Him. The Son loved the Father even as the Father inflicted suffering upon Him. It means that the Son of God experienced in His human nature of body and soul, that God was not His benevolent Father but the avenging and righteous Judge. It means that in His capacity as Judge, God showed no mercy to His Son but punished Him to the fullest extent, pouring out the full fury of His wrath.

*That*, the presence of God in wrath, but the absence of God’s favour, was intolerable for the holy Son of God. But that was necessary for our salvation. Christ experienced hell that day so that we would never experience hell, we who believe in Him.

**July 12 – Appeasing the Father’s Wrath**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I John 4:10 “...he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

Have you ever tried to propitiate someone? The word means to appease or to placate by offering a gift. The effect of propitiation is that the anger of an offended person is turned away. Jacob found himself in that position when he returned from Haran. He knew that his brother Esau was angry with him but he hoped to propitiate him. “I will appease him with the present that goeth before me...” (Gen 32:20).

Christ is our propitiation (I John 2:2, 4:10). This means that Christ has turned away the wrath of God which justly rested upon us. We were “children of wrath, even as others” (Eph 2:3). God was angry with us, and we were deserving of that anger. Christ removed that wrath from us by taking that wrath—and the guilt which was the ground for that wrath—upon Himself. Thus, especially on the cross, Christ became the object of God’s just and righteous wrath. As He was loaded down with our guilt, He felt that wrath burning against Him. That sense of God’s wrath reached its lowest and most bitter point when Christ from the depth of His anguished soul cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). When Jesus died, the wrath was removed. Now there is no wrath for any sinner for whom Christ died.

On the cross, then, God was angry with Jesus Christ. This does not mean that God hated His Son, or that God was personally angry with Him. The Son always pleased His Father, even when He was actively laying down His life on the cross. God was judicially angry with Jesus Christ, that is, God was angry with His Son in His capacity as the Judge. Jesus was justly the object of God’s wrath because Jesus was legally—but not personally—guilty of all the sins of the elect whom He represented. Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:21, “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” The Son of God was made to be sin! This does not mean that Jesus Christ became sinful. It means that He became legally guilty and therefore liable to be punished with God’s wrath.

We must understand God’s wrath as righteous wrath. God is not a vengeful God who enjoys inflicting pain upon His creatures. Rather God inflicts suffering on sinners according to strict justice. When God inflicted suffering on Jesus, which He felt as terrible punishment in body and soul, He was inflicting only what the Law required. Perhaps a person might object: why cannot God simply forgive without requiring that someone be punished in our place? The answer is that God’s justice demands it. Perhaps an illustration might help. If you break your neighbor’s window, he might choose to forgive you and not ask you to pay for the broken window. But does that mean that no payment will be made? Actually, your neighbor, by forgiving you, will pay to repair the window from his own money or his insurance company will pay. But there must be a payment made by someone! When God’s Law is transgressed, it is an affront to God’s holiness. If God chooses not to punish us for our sins, someone will have to pay. And, in grace, God paid for our sins Himself in the Person of His own Son.

The result of Christ’s death as propitiation is that the wrath of God is turned away from us. Because “Christ hath presented Himself in our behalf before the Father to appease His wrath by His full satisfaction”, we have no need to fear when we stand before Him.

Christ has died, and God is satisfied forever!

**July 13 – Offering Himself on the Tree of the Cross**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Peter 2:24 “Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree...”

Does it matter how Jesus Christ died? Could He have atoned for our sins by being stoned to death by a Jewish mob? Could His death have come about by drowning? Could He have died of natural causes at a ripe old age? The manner of Christ’s death does matter: He had to be crucified.

The cross was the means by which Christ offered Himself as a living sacrifice to God for the sins of His people. In the Old Testament, all the animal sacrifices were unwilling. They were slaughtered, their blood was sprinkled and their bodies were burned on the altar. The altar which Jesus chose for the place of His sacrifice was the cross. Art. 21 describes it in these words: “He hath presented Himself...to appease [God’s] wrath... by offering Himself on the tree of the cross and pouring out His precious blood to purge away our sins.”

There are many reasons why death by crucifixion was necessary for the Son of God. But the main reason is the most humbling. He must be crucified because we have sinned. Sometimes we tend to think that our sins are very minor. Often we try to excuse our sins. Sometimes, and more often than we care to admit, we love our sins and do not want to turn from them. We are so perverse by nature that we enjoy sin, although we know that it will bring shame, misery and ultimately death. When we are tempted to love our sins, we must look at the cross. Our sins are so vile in the sight of the holy God, that only the death of the Son of God could atone for them.

But there are other reasons why crucifixion was the kind of death Jesus died. First, the cross acted as an altar on which the Lamb of God could offer Himself. Consider some of the similarities between this sacrifice and the Old Testament sacrifices. The cross was a bloody, violent, traumatic death. In this way, Jesus shed His blood. On the cross Jesus was “burned” or consumed by the wrath of God in a way reminiscent of the burning of the flesh of animals on the altar.

Moreover, death by crucifixion was slow, deliberately so. Had Jesus been stabbed quickly with a dagger or received a quick blow to the head, He would not have been able actively to take to Himself the death which we deserved to bear. And let us never forget that Christ gave Himself over into the power of death. We do not find Him cowering among the trees when men came to arrest Him. He goes forth to them (John 18:4). We do not find Him loudly protesting His innocence and seeking to escape from the men who tried Him. “As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth” (Isa 53:7). When He was offered a sedative to dull His senses, He refused to drink it (Matt 27:34). He was determined to be fully alert when He offered Himself on the cross.

In a very real sense, therefore, we must view the cross as an altar. On that altar, the sacrifice to end all sacrifices was offered. A lamb was slain there, the Lamb of God. Blood was sprinkled there, the blood of our Saviour. Redemption was secured there, the redemption of our souls and bodies from eternal damnation.

Let us flee from all other altars to the cross of Christ, where the only perfect sacrifice was made.

**July 14 – Redeeming Us From God’s Curse**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Galatians 3:13 “...for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:”

Paul says about the Gospel of Christ crucified, that it was a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor 1:22-23). It was offensive to them that the Christians should believe and preach a crucified Messiah. The reason for this offence was that the law of Moses taught that a crucified person was cursed by God. “And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance” (Deut 21:22-23). In the Old Testament, the Jews stoned a man to death and then the corpse was hanged on a tree to expose it to open shame. Thus the corpse decomposed in the hot sun and was eaten by vultures. The idea was that such a person had no place in the land of the living and was utterly rejected by God. He was under God’s curse! Crucifixion was worse than that because a person was hanged on a tree, a piece of wood, while was still alive. Thus a man who was crucified bore God’s curse while He still lived.

For the Jews, those two concepts—God’s curse and the Messiah of God—did not fit together. The idea that God could curse His own Son was blasphemy. Therefore, that Jesus Christ was crucified and thus cursed, proved to the Jews that He could not be the Messiah.

But Paul explains how these two concepts fit together. The Son of God was made a curse *for others*. We, who deserve by our sins to be under God’s curse, receive God’s blessing because Christ bore the curse which we deserved. “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us...” (Gal 3:13). God’s curse is the word of His destructive wrath. To curse means to speak evil of, evil upon or against someone. God does not “say bad words,” as we forbid our children from doing. God’s curse is the righteous, holy word of His wrath which pronounces misery upon His enemies, devoting them to destruction and banishing them from Him so that they are eternally miserable. That curse must come upon all lawbreakers for, as Paul explains, “as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal 3:10).

That curse came in all its horror upon Jesus Christ. As one under God’s curse, He must be deprived of the favour of God. That happened on the cross. As one under God’s curse, He must be enveloped in darkness and taste the full misery of banishment from God. That, too, happened on the cross. Although God loved His Son, when Christ became the Sinbearer, He became the object of God’s just and holy wrath. The word of God’s wrath was directed against Him, and thus made Christ unspeakably miserable.

Behold Christ on the cross! He is there as a public spectacle of accursedness so that we might know that we have been redeemed from that curse which He bore on our behalf. The Jews stumbled at it and the Gentiles scoffed at it, but we glory in it. God therefore will not and cannot curse one who is in Christ, because to be in Christ is to be blessed. “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law... That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:13-14).

Christ was cursed so that we who believe in Him are blessed.

Do you know the blessing of God? Believe in the crucified Saviour!

**July 15 – Finding Consolation in His Wounds**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Galatians 6:14 “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.”

Christianity appears to be foolish to the world. We glory in the cross! Why would people glory—boast or rejoice—in the cross which was an instrument of cruel torture and agonizingly painful death? But we do not glory in the cross as a piece of wood. We rejoice in the cross because of what it has accomplished for us and what it means to us.

The death of Christ on the cross was the greatest evil ever perpetrated by man. Peter confronts the inhabitants of Jerusalem with that sin: “Ye have taken [Him], and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23). That same accusation comes to us—our sins have crucified the Lord of glory. Our transgressions nailed the Son of God to the accursed tree. Our iniquities brought down upon the perfect Lamb of God, the bruising, crushing, killing wrath of God. He felt the terrible punishment which our sins have merited. We were the unjust for whom He, the Just One died. He poured out His precious blood to purge our sins.

Jesus did not die so that we might feel sorry for Him. As He made His way to the cross, He rebuked those who bewailed Him: “Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves...” (Luke 23:28). Jesus does not need our pity. Jesus demands our repentance.

The reason we rejoice in the cross of Christ is because His death is the only and effectual atonement for our sins. Had Christ simply died as an example, we could not glory in His cross, because we would still be in our sins. Had Christ died merely to show us how righteous or loving God is—but without making satisfaction for our sins—we would have no reason to glory in His cross because it would not be the reason for our salvation. If Christ had died to make it possible for us to save ourselves, we would not glory in the cross, but in ourselves.

Art. 21 glories in the cross of Christ, “in whose wounds we find all manner of consolation.” We find consolation or comfort in the wounds of our Saviour because He was wounded, bruised and crushed *for us*—in our place! If He had not died, we would perish. When we consider what Christ suffered, we rejoice because His death means that we do not suffer for our sins. Instead, death is a passageway for us into eternal life. When we remember that He was made a curse for us, we know that this means that we will never suffer God’s curse. When we understand that He bore the wrath of God for us, we know that this means that we will never bear the wrath of God ourselves. What a difference that little word “for” makes!

Since Christ has paid it all, we need not—and indeed we cannot—pay anything ourselves. What a burden this truth lifts from our conscience. There is no need for us to pay penance, to punish ourselves for our own sins. There is no horrible prospect of purgatory after death where we would have to suffer for our own sins. “Neither is it necessary to seek or invent any other means of being reconciled to God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which believers are made perfect forever” is the joyful conclusion of Art. 21.

Let us derive comfort from Christ’s wounds. We who are covered by His blood can never perish. All the blessings of salvation are ours—freely, because Christ has paid for them!



## **Article 22: Faith in Jesus Christ.**

*We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all his merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him. For it must needs follow, either that all things, which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or, if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides Him, would be too gross a blasphemy: for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.*

*Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith without works. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.*

**July 16 – The True Knowledge of this Great Mystery**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Timothy 3:16: “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness ...”

Paul writes to Timothy that the Christian faith is a “mystery.” Some have thought that this means that Christianity is an incomprehensible riddle or an enigma. Since that is so, they have concluded, there is no point in trying to understand the Christian faith. It is beyond human comprehension. Others have said that Christianity can only be understood by the initiated—those who are “let in” to the secret by means of special ceremonies and rites.

If that were true, we and our children could not be Christians. We are very thankful that that is *not* what the Bible means by mystery.

A mystery in the Bible is something which has not been revealed before but now has been revealed; or a mystery is something hidden in God’s counsel—God’s eternal plan for all things—which had been known before only in part, but now has been fully disclosed to God’s people in the light of the fullness of New Testament revelation. Paul develops this idea in Ephesians 3. There he tells the Ephesians that in the past the Gentiles’ inclusion in the church of God was a mystery in the Old Testament: “Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, *as it is now revealed* unto his holy apostles and prophets that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs ...” (v5-6). It is not that the salvation of the Gentiles was completely unknown in the Old Testament, but it was not known as clearly or fully as it is known now. Thus it was a mystery.

A mystery, then, is a truth of God’s counsel which we cannot know except by revelation, and which now has been made known, which had not previously been made known to the extent to which it is now known by New Testament Christians.

The great mystery of the Gospel has been explained in the previous articles of the *Belgic Confession*—the incarnation of Jesus Christ; the union and distinction of the two natures in the one person of Christ; and the manifestation of God’s justice and mercy in the satisfaction of Christ on the cross. These truths were not completely unknown in the Old Testament. They were depicted in types and shadows, and God gave some remarkably explicit prophecies concerning these truths. But in the New Testament the veil has been removed and we see clearly what was known only dimly in the Old Testament. We are partakers of a great mystery!

Art. 22 deals with a new question. Given what Christ has done in His incarnation, His life of obedience and His atoning death, how do the benefits of His death and resurrection become ours personally? If Christ has done everything on the cross which is necessary for our salvation, how are we actually saved?

To this question there have been several answers. Some teach that Christ has done all that He can, and now you must do your part. The common presentation of this view is of a Christ who now offers salvation to whomever will accept it. But this is a denial of the power of Christ. The Biblical, Reformed and confessional answer is that the same Christ who purchased salvation *applies* that salvation to His people by working faith in them.

And saving faith is the subject of Art. 22: what is faith; where does faith come from; what does faith look to; and how does faith bring us into possession of salvation? These questions we will address in future meditations.

**July 17 – Faith’s Knowledge of Christ**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

II Peter 1:8: “... ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Unlike our *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Belgic Confession* does not give a definition of faith, but we can certainly find the main elements of faith in Art. 22. We must be clear, however, at the beginning, that there is a distinction between objective faith (what we believe) and subjective faith (our activity of believing). The focus of the *Confession* is on the latter: by the activity of faith we become partakers of Christ. What kind of faith is that?

First, we read of faith as *knowledge* (by faith we “attain the true knowledge”); second, we read of faith’s *object* (“an upright faith which embraces Jesus Christ with all His benefits, appropriates Him”); third, we read of the *confidence* of faith which finds all things in Christ (“and seeks nothing more besides Him”).

There is much confusion about faith today. For some, faith is simply a vague feeling, but it has no content. For others faith is a leap in the dark, a step out into the unknown and unknowable. For still others, faith is belief without evidence or belief in the face of all contrary evidence. An atheist, such as Richard Dawkins, derides faith in Jesus Christ as credible as belief in the “flying spaghetti monster” or the “tooth fairy”!

The first element of saving faith is knowledge. A believer knows, not only *about God*, but a believer *knows God* in Jesus Christ. In fact, so precious is this knowledge that Christ calls it “eternal life.” “And this is life eternal that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

We must stress this point in our anti-doctrinal age. We who believe know who God is, what God has done in Jesus Christ; and the more we know, the stronger our faith becomes. To claim faith without knowledge is to worship an unknown God as did the heathen in Athens (Acts 17:23) or to worship what we do not know as did the Samaritans (John 4:22). Faith is not ignorance.

The source of this knowledge is the Word of God. We cannot know anything of God without the Bible. Faith believes everything revealed in the Word of God—the history, the miracles, the doctrines, the promises—and faith is informed and increased by the Word of God, especially by hearing the preaching. That is why preaching must have content—the minister may not bring silly stories and moral lessons to entertain the people of God. That is why, too, we must hear preaching. A Christian who absents himself from preaching, and does not read the Scriptures at home, must expect to have weak faith. A Christian who diligently attends the means of grace ought to expect an increased and strengthened faith.

But none of this means that faith is merely intellectual. The knowledge of faith is the knowledge of love, the knowledge of a personal relationship, the knowledge of the covenant. The covenant is friendship. Friends know about one another. They know one another’s likes, dislikes and interests. And friends know one another. They have communion, they share one another’s life, they spend time together, and they communicate.

What a privilege that the infinitely glorious God would condescend to know us, and to permit us to know Him, through faith in Jesus Christ!

**July 18 – An Upright, Not Counterfeit, Faith**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

James 2:19: "... the devils also believe, and tremble."

The story is told of an interview between a minister of a church and a prospective candidate for membership. "What do you believe?" the minister asked. "I believe what the church believes," was the answer. Somewhat confused, the minister asked again, "What does the church believe?" "Oh, the church believes what I believe," was the reply. Somewhat frustrated, the minister asked again, "But what do you and the church believe?" To this final question the man replied, "The church and I believe the same thing!"

That is not the upright faith described in our creed. The word upright simply means true. There is true or saving faith, and there are other species of false or non-saving faith. It is very important that we know the difference between these things because without faith it is impossible to please God, and one can certainly not please God by a counterfeit faith.

The first species of false faith is "implicit faith." One with implicit faith blindly follows what the church says. In fact, it is not even necessary for a man with implicit faith to *know* what the church teaches. Implicit faith is found in many who entrust their soul to the church. They assume that the church has the truth, and, because they are in some sense connected to the church, they will be saved. You might discuss doctrine with such a person, and he will tell you that he does not need to bother with doctrine because the minister or priest studies these things and he simply trusts him. This species of faith makes ignorance a virtue, and denies that faith is knowledge. It is because we reject "implicit faith" that we insist on thorough catechism for our members.

The second species of false faith is temporary faith. Temporary faith is the response of some to the gospel. They are initially very excited—a mere emotional response—but when difficulties come they are offended and fall away. They were never truly converted. Christ says that they have no root (Matt 13:21). Having no root, they do not live out of Christ. Emotional faith is not faith.

The third species of false faith is historical faith. The demons have such "faith." They know that there is one God, and they tremble (Jam 2:19). A man with historical faith knows the facts of the Bible and he even "believes" them—he believes that there was a man called Jesus; he believes that there is a place called heaven—but he does not appropriate these things to himself (Acts 8:20-24). He does not trust in the Christ revealed in Scripture. He cannot say, as Paul did, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (II Tim 1:12).

The fourth, and final, species of counterfeit faith is miraculous faith. Multitudes had this faith in the days of Jesus (John 2:23-25). They believed that He could perform miracles; they were recipients of miracles; and some even performed miracles in His name, but they did not believe in Jesus Christ (Matt 7:22-23). When the miracles ended, and the truth of Christ was presented, they turned away.

True faith, unlike all these counterfeits, is a certain knowledge and hearty confidence in Jesus Christ, a faith which expects all things necessary for salvation from Christ alone. It is that "upright" faith of which Art. 22 speaks.

**July 19 – Faith Keeping Us In Communion with Christ**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

John 15:4: “Abide in me, and I in you ...”

“Faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with [Christ] in all His benefits.” By these words the *Belgic Confession* teaches the same truth as the *Heidelberg Catechism*, that faith is a bond which unites the sinner to Jesus Christ.

This implies that by nature we are not united to Jesus Christ. Something must happen to us so that we become united to Him. The illustration of Scripture, especially in John 15 and Romans 11, is of a branch which is engrafted into the living Vine. The illustration comes from horticulture or gardening. A gardener is able to take a branch from one plant, make an incision in the trunk of another plant, and join them so that a bond is formed between the two plants. The branch then begins to live out of the life of the new plant, and it even bears fruit from the life of new plant, even if the plant is a different species! This living connection between the two plants is called a *graft*. The process of making a graft is called *engrafting*.

Perhaps you have encountered other illustrations—faith is like a water pipe conveying water from a reservoir; or faith is like a socket connecting an appliance to an electricity supply. These illustrations, although useful, are inferior to the one the Bible uses, because they are not living connections. A graft, unlike a water pipe or electric socket, is not a mechanical or static connection. In grafting, the gardener does not simply glue a branch onto a trunk. That would not create a living bond. For the bond to be effective the branch must live out of the trunk of the other plant; it must receive the goodness from the sap of the Vine.

However, the graft which the human gardener is able to create by skilled horticulture is still a limited illustration. Can the gardener pick up an old, dead, withered twig and attempt to make a graft with a living tree? No, because the twig is dead! It must be living before it is attached to the trunk of a new tree.

The miracle of salvation is greater. God is not limited as is the human gardener.

In salvation, the Holy Spirit takes a sinner—who is like an old, dead, withered stick lying on the ground, severed from the only source of life—and He unites that sinner to Jesus Christ (John 15:1-2). The sinner certainly does not have any power of himself to unite himself to Jesus Christ. Nor, in fact, does the sinner even desire it. He is dead! The Holy Spirit gives to the sinner the life of Jesus Christ in uniting him or her to Jesus Christ.

We call that vital connection, bond or union *faith*.

That aspect of faith is much neglected today by many who see faith simply as something we do. Before we do something—before we become active in faith—God does something. And our activity depends entirely on His.

To express this theologically, before the activity of faith—looking to and believing in Christ—there must be the “faculty” of faith, or the bond of faith. Another illustration is that of sight. Before a man sees, he must have the faculty of sight. You can no more expect an unbeliever to believe without the faculty of faith than a blind man to see without the faculty of sight.

And once we are united to Jesus Christ by the bond of faith we begin to believe: we begin to live out of the Saviour to whom we are united. As Romans 11:17 puts it we partake of the root and fatness. What a wonder!

**July 20 – Faith Expecting All Things From Christ**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Hebrews 11:1 “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

Hebrews 11 is the great chapter on faith—it describes the activity of faith of a great cloud of witnesses from the Old Testament Scriptures (Heb 12:1). The opening verse gives the closest to what we have in Scripture to a definition of faith. It is two things, substance and evidence.

Substance is not the word we might have expected to read. We think of substance as the “stuff” out of which things are made. Clearly, that is not the meaning of substance here. When the Bible speaks of faith as substance it means something substantial, solid, weighty. The idea is steadiness of mind, a firm and solid resolution and assurance concerning things which are not seen. The things “not seen” are not unicorns or leprechauns or hobgoblins (imaginary, mythical, nonsensical things), but things “hoped for,” that is things promised by God and therefore confidently expected—the spiritual realities of salvation and eternal life.

Thus, it is fitting that Art. 22 speaks of the expectation of faith. In faith we look to someone from whom we expect good things.

The believer expects all good things from Christ alone. By faith he can see them, those invisible things come clearly before his mind. Thus the *Confession* declares with unshakable confidence, “those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him” and “when [Christ and all His benefits] become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.” Therefore, by faith, the believer knows—knows with an absolute, unshakable, undeniable certainty—not only that there is a heaven, eternal life, future glory, kingdom of God, and everything else promised in the Gospel, but that these things are *ours*, even ours!

Do you know that? Believer in Jesus Christ, you do and you must!

Second, faith is evidence. We all know that science likes to boast of solid evidence. We hear that unbelieving scientists mock Christians because we believe without evidence or contrary to the evidence. Not so! Faith *is* evidence. The word “evidence” in Hebrews 11:1 means conviction or proof. Through faith the believer is convinced that what God has promised is true. The believer does not require any other “evidence” than the Word of God itself. This is something we must remember. When an unbeliever asks for evidence, we cannot give it to him in the form in which he demands it. Was Noah able to give “evidence” to the world of his day? Was Abraham able to give evidence? Neither should we expect to give (or be given) evidence today. The words of Abraham to the rich man are true: “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Luke 6:31).

A believer is convinced by faith *itself*. An unbeliever can never be convinced because he has no faith. To try to convince an unbeliever without faith to believe is akin to trying to convince a blind man without the faculty of sight to see. Faith is a miracle—certain knowledge, assured confidence, absolute conviction—worked in the heart of man, worked in our hearts and in the hearts of our children.

**July 21 – Faith As Assurance**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

II Timothy 1:12 “for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.”

One who has faith *knows* that he has eternal life. One who has faith *knows* that he belongs to Jesus Christ now and forever. One who has faith *knows* that nothing will separate him from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:31-39). In other words, faith is personal assurance of salvation, and personal assurance of eternal election. Without this assurance, a man cannot live—and he certainly cannot die—for Christ. In fact, without this knowledge, we dare not die at all.

Assurance of salvation is something which God desires for all His children. In giving us faith, He gives us assurance, because faith *is* assurance. About this, there should be no doubt. What father would be happy if only a few of his children really believed that he loved them and that he was their father? How would a loving father react if he knew that many of his children were afraid to come to him because they believed that there was a distinct possibility that they did not really belong to him? If earthly fathers find such a thought intolerable, how could our Heavenly Father be pleased that His children live and die without any assurance of His love? And how cruel would God be to leave His children in suspense about such an important thing? Without such assurance, no prayer, good works and worship are possible.

The devil knows that if he can cause God’s children to doubt their salvation, he can ruin their experience of the Christian life, cut the throat of their comfort and lead them to despair. Doubts are part of the “fiery darts of the wicked” which can only be quenched with the shield of faith (Eph 6:16).

The Bible presupposes that the people of God know that they are saved and that they know that they are among the number of God’s elect. Everywhere, the apostles address God’s people this way. Often the apostles urge believers to make their calling and election sure. Doubts are not normal, healthy or useful in the Christian life. Doubt is sin, the enemy of faith. Jesus rebuked His disciples more than once for doubt. To Peter He says, “O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” (Matt 14:31). To Thomas—we call him “Doubting Thomas”—Jesus says, “Be not faithless, but believing” (John 20:27). James rebukes the man who prays with doubts: “...But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering ...” (Jam 1:6).

The ministers of the Gospel must never foster or encourage doubts. There are preachers who do this. They encourage a morbid self-examination, a spiritual navel gazing. “Are you really converted?” they ask. In such churches the number of doubters is so great that very few church members come to the Lord’s Supper! That is a travesty, the fruit of preaching which discourages faith and encourages doubt. Apostolic preaching does not encourage doubt. It rebukes doubt. It urges to faith. It seeks to strengthen and build up faith.

How, then, can I know that I am an elect child of God? I do not look for assurance in experiences or in feelings. I know that I am elect *by faith*. Only the elect have faith. Faith itself is the assurance of salvation. And when I have doubts—and remember that all Christians struggle with doubts in one form or another and at various times in their lives, especially when they fall into sin or are vexed by some affliction—I view that doubt as sin, confess it as such and cry to God, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

**July 22 – Faith Kindled by the Holy Spirit**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Philippians 1:29 “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him ...”

We have seen in the previous meditations that faith is, first, knowledge; second, a bond; and, third, confidence (expectation). There are many professing Christians who believe that a sinner can work up this knowledge and confidence—they usually ignore the truth of faith as a bond—by the exercise of his own freewill.

According to this view—Arminianism—every sinner has in himself the capacity to believe, and all that is necessary to bring him to faith is persuasion. This explains Arminian evangelism—the emotional appeals, the high-powered evangelist, the music, the atmosphere. Everything in such evangelism is designed to appeal to the sinner’s emotions and especially his will. If some less radical Arminians find a place for the Holy Spirit, they still insist that the sinner has the possibility to resist or cooperate with the “wooing” of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is not, and cannot be, according to Arminianism, *irresistible* or *effectual*.

This is not at all the truth of the biblical concept of faith as explained in Art. 22. That is set forth in a beautiful expression—“to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Ghost kindleth in our hearts an upright faith.”

That the Holy Spirit “kindles” faith in us means, first, that without the kindling power of the Holy Spirit we are *dark and cold*. To kindle means to ignite, to start a fire, which brings both light and heat. Our hearts are cold; in them there is no affection for Jesus Christ. Quite the contrary. We love darkness rather than light and we will not come to the light because our deeds are evil (John 3:19-20). Our hearts are dark; in them there is no knowledge of the true God or of Jesus Christ, but horrible darkness and blindness. Can such a heart—cold, dark, lifeless—produce the slightest spark of faith? Of course not!

For this reason, the Bible speaks consistently of faith as a gift, a gift which God breathes into us and works in us, or kindles in us. Ephesians 2:8 teaches that faith is “not of yourselves: it is the gift of God;” and Philippians 1:29 teaches that it is “given”—graciously and freely granted—to us to believe.

But the Arminian has a subterfuge. He says, “Yes, faith is a gift but you must accept it.” Notice how the Arminian changes faith from a gift into an offer. But notice, too, the absurdity of that position. How do we supposedly accept this gift of faith? By believing! So, we can have the gift of faith *if we believe*. That would be to say to a blind man, “I will give you the gift of sight, if you see!”

What a difference the work of the Holy Spirit makes! In a dead, lifeless, cold, dark heart the Spirit kindles a true and living faith. Now there is the light of the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ! Now there is an assured confidence in the Saviour! Now there is hope and joy in believing! Let us never be tempted to rob the Spirit of His glory by attributing that great miracle of kindling saving faith to ourselves!



**July 23 – Faith Seeking Nothing More Besides Christ**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Galatians 2:20: “The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God.”

Faith is not common to all men. Often we hear that all men have faith—that faith is simply trust in something. Thus people say that when you sit on a chair you exercise “faith” in the chair that it will not collapse under you. But that is not faith. That is a weighing up of probabilities. You assume that the chair was built to sustain your weight; no one has broken the chair before you; you have no reason to think that the chair will break now.

When we say that we believe in Jesus Christ we mean much more than that. Faith confidently and with full assurance seeks all good things from Jesus Christ. That is because we know Jesus Christ. Therefore, when our faith in Jesus Christ brings us hardship—and it will—we do not cast away our confidence. Faith is childlike trust. Why does a child trust his father? Because he knows his father—he knows his father’s character, and he knows his father’s love. This knowledge gives the child confidence in the presence of his father. The same child behaves differently around strangers, because he does not know strangers. As Jesus said about His sheep who know Him as Shepherd, “And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers” (John 10:5).

The New Testament teaches that faith is confidence by means of two prepositions—small words which indicate position or movement. First, the New Testament speaks about believing *into* Jesus Christ; second, the New Testament teaches that we live *out of* Christ and that we are justified by (lit., “out of”) faith. These expressions teach us that the source of life for the believer is Jesus Christ, and that by believing he partakes of the benefits of Jesus Christ. These expressions also strengthen our conviction that faith is a bond which unites us to Jesus Christ and out of which we live.

Moreover, the believer has faith exclusively in Jesus Christ. He does not believe in other saviours, and he does not divide his allegiance between saviours. If all things necessary for salvation were not found in Christ, Christ would be but “half a Saviour.” Of course, the *Belgic Confession*, a Reformation creed, has Roman Catholicism in mind—Rome taught that the saints, especially Mary, contributed to salvation. But we must not forget the error of self-salvation—the error that we can contribute something to our salvation in the form of good works.

The answer to all self-salvation is the sufficiency of Christ. Remember the Vine and the branches. The branches receive the sap from the Vine through the graft. The branches do not suck the sap from the Vine and from some other plant at the same time. For the branches there is no other source of life. If the branch ever becomes separated from the Vine—which, of course, could never happen— it will die. The same is true for us. We live out of Jesus Christ, not out of ourselves, nor out of Jesus Christ and someone else. “Without me,” says Christ, “ye can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Let us seek all things in Jesus Christ alone, by faith alone.

### **Article 23: Justification.**

*We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied: as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the happiness of man, that God imputes righteousness to him without works. And the same apostle saith, that we are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ.*

*And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours, when we believe in him. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig-leaves. And verily if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. And therefore every one must pray with David: O Lord, enter not into judgment with Thy servant: for in Thy sight shall no man living be justified.*

**July 24 – Salvation: the Remission of Sins**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Psalm 32:1: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”

Art. 22-23 of the *Belgic Confession* belong together because Art. 23 is a continuation of Art. 22. Both deal with justification by faith alone. The peculiar emphasis of Art. 23 is the utter graciousness of justification. From it all of our works must be excluded.

First and foremost says Art. 23, “we believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ’s sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied.” Remission is another word for forgiveness. Salvation is forgiveness of sins because it is the chief blessing and the blessing without which we have nothing. That is David’s emphasis in Psalm 32. As a king he had experienced many good things in life—he lived in a beautiful palace; he had many faithful servants; he had riches; and in his kingdom there was peace. But none of those things meant anything to David when he did not know the forgiveness of sins. David fell into gross public sin for a time, and refused to repent. During a prolonged period of impenitence David experienced the opposite of the blessedness of forgiveness. God’s heavy hand of chastisement was upon him, and he knew no peace, no joy and no satisfaction in God (Psa 32:3-4). But in the way of confession and repentance David had come again to experience the joy of the forgiveness of sin. That was the occasion of his writing Psalm 32.

The conclusion of Psalm 32 is really the first verse: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” In the Psalm, which Paul quotes to prove gracious justification in Romans 4:6-8, David describes sin using three words: “transgression, sin and iniquity.” A transgression is the crossing of a boundary, in this case the boundary of God’s Law. In transgressing the Law, David deliberately, willfully and wickedly rebelled against God. The Law said, “Thou shalt not.” David said, “I will disregard the Law, and I will do what I want.” This was a rebellious shaking of the fist in the face of God! And this sin arose from hatred of God in David’s heart. A sin is a missing of the mark. Observe an archer. He has a target, but instead of aiming at the target he turns his bow and shoots in the opposite direction. That’s sin. When we sin we refuse to aim at the mark which is the glory of the God. We shoot at a different mark, the mark of our own pleasure, our own glory. Iniquity, the third word David uses—behold how manifold sin is that the Bible uses so many words to describe it!—means something twisted, perverse or bent. Our calling is to conform to the standard of God, but we pervert our way and refuse to walk uprightly according to God’s commandments.

Transgression, sin, iniquity! High-handed rebellion against the Almighty!

The wonder—the great blessedness of which Psalm 32 speaks—is that God forgives. The word “forgive” in Psalm 32:1 is to lift up or to carry away. Sin like a heavy burden, was crushing David, and God carried that burden away, bringing relief to David’s soul. What blessedness! The last word in Psalm 32:1 is “covered.” The word means to blot out or to conceal. When God forgives our sins He covers them up so that He does not see them with a view to punishing us for them. David had tried to cover his own sins, but this had led only to misery.

God lifts our sins; He carries them away; He covers them; He blots them out. That’s forgiveness. And we who know that forgiveness, are blessed above measure.

**July 25 – Forgiven for Jesus Christ’s Sake**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I John 1:7: “... the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin ...”

Yesterday we rejoiced in the forgiveness of sins, and we especially noticed what sin is and what it means for God to forgive us our sins. God lifts or carries away, and God blots out or covers over, our sins, transgressions and iniquities, and does not punish us for them. But the question which begs to be asked is this: How can that be possible?

The answer Art. 23 gives is “for Jesus Christ’s sake.” That expression which we hear so often, especially at the end of many prayers, contains a wealth of meaning. God forgives us for the sake of Christ, or because of Christ, or on the basis of what Christ has done for us.

Both Abraham and David, who lived in the Old Testament before the coming of Christ, understood that. Every child of God has understood that to a greater or lesser degree. Every believer in Israel, who stood before a sacrifice of a bleeding lamb and trusted in God for the forgiveness of sins, understood that. We must understand that too, and we do by faith.

No child of God trusts in himself for the forgiveness of sins. Pardon is found in another, namely Jesus Christ. Take the example of David. He stands before God defiled by the sin of adultery and his hands dripping with Uriah’s blood. What is his plea, on what does he base his hope for pardon? God does not say to David, “You have sinned, but I am willing to overlook your sin and hopefully you will do better in the future.” God does not say to David, “Your sins are very serious and my Law says that the sinner must die, but I will take into account your good works. At the end of your life I will look at how you have done and if your good works outweigh your bad works, I will forgive you then.” David did not have any good works. He did not plead any good works. The only “works” David mentions are transgressions, sins, iniquity and guile.

Moreover, Psalm 32 declares that David was a passive recipient of, not an active participant in, salvation. “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven.” Not “blessed is the man who forgives his own transgressions,” or “blessed is the man who carries away his own burden of transgressions,” or even “blessed is the man who helps God carry away his own transgressions.” “Blessed is he whose sin is covered.” Not “blessed is he who covers up his own sins” (David had tried that—it was called “guile” or deceit—and that had made him miserable).

How, then, can God bless the sinner and make him happy by forgiving his sins? The answer is that another—Jesus Christ—carried away our sins, blotted them out and thus covered them over in the sight of God. Upon Jesus Christ, the great son of David, and the eternal Son of God in our flesh, God piled the load of David’s guilt—and ours! Imagine that burden! That heavy load of guilt, which would have crushed a mere man, Christ carried to the cross, and there He suffered under the heavy wrath of God. God removed the load of guilt from us and placed it on the shoulders of Christ. On the cross, too, Christ blotted out our sins. No amount of scrubbing and no amount of soap could have removed one stain of our sin. Christ covered our filthy stains, not by “brushing them under a rug,” but by fully satisfying God’s wrath for them, and then rising again from the dead, having conquered the power of death, sin, hell and the devil.

Thus God is satisfied, Christ is glorified, and we are blessed!

**July 26 – Justification: God As Judge**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Deuteronomy 25:1: “...They shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked”

Justification by faith alone is the heart of the Gospel. By it the Reformers answered from the Bible the urgent question, “How can I, a sinner, be right with God?” The answer is that God justifies us freely by His grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

To understand the doctrine expounded here we must understand several key concepts. The very first thing we must comprehend is that in justification, God acts as the *Judge*.

A judge is one who examines a defendant with respect to the law, and then, having examined him, determines whether he is innocent or guilty; and, if the defendant is guilty, the judge determines and officially pronounces the sentence of punishment. If the defendant is innocent, the judge officially pronounces him innocent and free from punishment. When the Bible reveals that God is Judge, we must understand that God evaluates all His rational, moral creatures with respect to His Law. Have men and angels kept His Law or not? God evaluates all of us with respect to that great question. In fact, God is always judging, and man must know (and does know) that he is always being judged. The conscience of a man—remember that man’s conscience is that little “judge” in his heart, a “judge” placed there by God Himself—either accuses or excuses a man with respect to the moral worth (or demerit) of his actions (Rom 2:15). The eyes of the Judge are everywhere (Prov 15:3), and no man can escape Him!

It is important that we stress this at the very beginning. Justification deals *only* with a man’s relationship to the Law of God. Every other subject, although important in its own place, is irrelevant to the subject of *justification*. When we consider the great doctrine of the justification of sinners, therefore, we must think of God *only* as Judge.

Perhaps an illustration will help. Imagine for a moment that you stand before a human judge. The judge in the courtroom will examine you with respect to the question of your guilt or innocence. He will weigh up the evidence and make a judgment, and the one question he will ask himself will be this: “Has this person committed a crime or has he kept the law?” The judge will not be interested in your character—that you are generally a nice person. The judge will disregard the fact that you have up to this point been law-abiding—that you have had a clean driving record, let’s say. The question will be, “Have you committed the crime?” If you have—and if the judge is a just judge—the verdict will be and it will have to be “guilty!” If you have not, the verdict will be “not guilty!” This is the case even if the judge before whom you stand is a friend, a close relation, or even your own father.

That was God’s requirement for judges. They had to condemn the wicked, that is, declare that the wicked were guilty and punish them accordingly. They had to justify the righteous, that is, declare that the righteous were innocent and deal with them accordingly. God forbade them to justify the wicked, by turning a blind eye to their crimes, or by accepting bribes; or to condemn the righteous, by accepting false testimony against them.

The astonishing truth is that God justifies those who are *sinners*. The question we must answer is: how is that possible? That question only the glorious doctrine of justification by faith alone, answers.

**July 27 – Justification: God’s Legal Declaration**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Proverbs 17:15: “He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the LORD”

Yesterday, we considered the important truth that in justification, God is the Judge, and we began to examine what exactly God does in His capacity as Judge. Judges examine evidence, determine guilt or innocence, and then declare a verdict.

We could define justification briefly thus: “Justification is God’s legal declaration of righteousness.”

First, justification is legal. It pertains to the law, to things judicial or forensic. All of those terms are used in theological works on justification. Notice first the words “legal” and “judicial.” They mean “pertaining to law.” That word “forensic” may be less familiar, but it too pertains to law. Forensic medicine, for example, is medical examination with a view to presenting a case in court. Blood samples, traces of hair, DNA and fingerprints are part of the “forensic” examination of a crime scene. Thus, the language of a law court is prevalent in texts which deal with justification. The issue in justification is only guilt or innocence, only acquittal or condemnation. A person may be accused of a crime—a transgression of God’s Law in this case—but is acquitted and justified before God’s judgment seat. How that happens we will examine later. For now we want to stress that *that* is what happens.

Second, justification is a declaration, or an official pronouncement, verdict, statement or judgment. When God justifies, He speaks about a person’s relationship to the Law. If the person is not in harmony with the standards of God’s perfect Law, God pronounces him guilty, and thus God “condemns” him. If the person is in harmony with the standards of God’s perfect Law, God pronounces him innocent, and thus “justifies” him. The fact that in the Bible, “justify” and “condemn” are opposites proves that justification is a declaration. When God condemns the sinner, He does not make the sinner wicked or ungodly. Similarly, when God justifies us, He does not make us morally good.

That explains, too, Proverbs 17:15. God abominates the wicked judge who “justifies the wicked” and “condemns the righteous.” The judge must not declare the wicked to be righteous, or the righteous to be wicked. His legal declaration must be in truth. And, as we shall see, God’s righteous declarations are in truth. To summarize: justification is the declaration from God’s judgment seat that a person is righteous, not guilty, and therefore not worthy of punishment. It is not something which God does *inside* a sinner to make him morally good, but is a declaration concerning his position with respect to the Law. Someone has wisely remarked that when God justifies He acts in His capacity as the Judge, not as a surgeon!

Third, justification is *God’s* legal declaration. When the Almighty God justifies, that verdict is final. It cannot be overturned, appealed against, changed, increased, decreased or lost. A man is either justified or he is condemned. There is no middle ground. Thus Paul dares anyone to overturn the justifying verdict of God: “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth ...?” (Rom 8:33-34).

Justification: God’s legal declaration concerning us that we are righteous. What a wonder!

**July 28 – Justification: A Declaration of Righteousness**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 3:22: “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe ...”

Yesterday we did not finish explaining our short definition of justification: “God’s legal declaration of righteousness.” We need also to define and explain *righteousness* because righteousness is absolutely vital in justification.

Righteousness is conformity to a standard or a norm. The word “righteous” in Scripture means straight, level or even. Something righteous conforms to and is in harmony with a given standard. The opposite of righteous is crooked, twisted, bent or perverse. Thus, the word “iniquity” (one of the words for sin in the Bible) means crookedness or perversity. Scripture says that God is righteous or just. That raises a question: if God is righteous, and righteousness is harmony with a standard, with what standard is God in harmony? The answer is Himself: God is unswervingly committed to *Himself* as the highest and only standard. There is no higher standard outside of God to which He would have to conform. Therefore, whatever or whoever is in conformity to God’s standard of righteousness is righteous, and is declared righteous; and whatever or whoever deviates from God’s standard is unrighteous and is declared unrighteous. It really does not matter if you conform to the standards of society, or even to your own standards. Do you conform to God’s standard?

Clearly we do not, for we are sinners. Therefore it would appear that our justification is impossible.

God is righteous. Therefore He must punish sin and sinners for their unrighteousness. That is one way in which the Bible speaks of righteousness. Martin Luther knew that aspect of God’s righteousness, and it troubled him greatly. He understood that, since God is righteous, He will and must punish all those who do not conform to the standard which God has revealed in His perfect Law. Imagine Luther’s confusion, therefore, when he read in Romans 1:16-17, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ ... for therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith ...” Luther could not make sense of this. On the one hand, the Gospel is *good news* for poor sinners. On the other hand, the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God, which, as Luther understood it, is God’s perfect character according to which He punishes sinners. How could God’s righteousness possibly be *good news* for a sinner such as Luther?

Luther could have no peace until he understood that the righteousness of God means more than that; and that it is something which God *gives* to sinners so that they can stand before Him without fear of condemnation. Art. 22 has this in mind when it states that “Christ ... is our righteousness”.

Romans 3 gives the answers to Luther’s problem. There Paul speaks of the righteousness of God again. This righteousness is “manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets” (v21). And, crucially, this righteousness is “*unto* all and *upon* all them that believe” (v22). The righteousness of God, then, is not merely one of God’s perfect attributes, but something He bestows upon us. It is the righteousness from God, the only righteousness which satisfies the demands of God’s holy Law.

Do you have that righteousness? Believer in Christ, you do!

**July 29 – Christ Our Righteousness**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Jeremiah 23:6: "... and this is His name whereby He shall be called, the LORD our righteousness."

In previous meditations we have seen that justification is God's declaration that we are in perfect harmony with the standard of God's perfect Law, free from all guilt, and worthy of eternal life. In other words, justification is "God's legal declaration of righteousness. "

The issue that we must address is this: *on what basis* can God justify us? We noticed earlier that the calling of a judge is to justify the righteous, and to condemn the wicked (Deut 25:1; Prov 17:15). We also know that God always justifies according to truth (Rom 2:2). Could an opponent of the Reformed Faith argue that we are teaching that God does what no human judge may do, that He is justifying the ungodly? (Rom 3:26; 4:5). How can God do that and remain just? Does God simply pretend that we are righteous when in reality we are not? Does God turn a blind eye to our sins and bless us anyway? We answer with the blessed truth, that the basis of our justification is the righteousness of another, namely Jesus Christ.

We are not righteous in ourselves. We certainly are not in perfect harmony with or in perfect conformity to the Law of God. And yet, when He justifies us, God declares that we are righteous! He does so because Christ, whose righteousness becomes ours in justification, is our righteousness. That is how the *Belgic Confession* explains it, "Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness" (Art. 22) and our justification rests on "the obedience of Christ crucified" (Art. 23).

For Christ to be our righteousness, He must meet all the demands of the Law for us and in our place. We can never meet these demands, and, since God will never set aside His demands without denying Himself, Christ humbled Himself to meet those demands for us.

First, Christ paid for all our transgressions against the Law of God. He did that by suffering the wrath of God especially on the cross and by dying under God's curse. Second, Christ obeyed all the commandments of God's Law, and never deviated from the path of God's righteousness. This—Christ's lifelong obedience and His atoning death which satisfied God's justice—is our righteousness before God. On the basis of *this* God accepts us as righteous, without any guilt and worthy of all the blessings of salvation. God declares concerning us, "This one, whom I see in my beloved Son Jesus Christ, is righteous. I see no sin in Him. I see only the merits of my Son and the many holy works which He has performed. And because of what I see I am perfectly satisfied that this one is in harmony with Me, with My Law, and I pronounce blessings upon him."

That was Paul's confession in Philippians 3. Paul had tried to be justified by "mine own righteousness which is of the law" (v9). That righteousness, hypothetically speaking, would come to one who by hard work had managed to live in harmony with God's Law. Paul called that "mine own righteousness (v9). Paul rejected that righteousness as an impossibility—he even calls it loss or dung! (v7-8)—and clings to the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the righteousness which Christ Himself had wrought for Paul and for all believers by His life and death.

That righteousness—the righteousness which comes from Christ and not from us—is the only basis for justification.



**July 30 – The Error of Romish Justification  
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Luke 18:14: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.”

In previous meditations, we have carefully defined the elements of the Reformed doctrine of justification. We have done this deliberately because justification by faith alone is the heart of the gospel, the “article of a standing or a falling church” (Luther) and “the hinge on which salvation turns” (Calvin). We have also done this so that we can contrast it with the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. Truth is always clearer against the background of error.

It should not surprise us that the Roman doctrine of justification is the antithesis of what we have been learning from the *Belgic Confession*.

First, in Roman Catholicism justification is not so much a legal declaration as a moral renewal, or a legal declaration *based on a moral renewal*. Roman Catholicism downplays the legal aspect of justification. Instead of a *declaration* of righteousness, Rome speaks of a *making* righteous. Rome teaches that justification is a moral, cleansing work in the soul which brings about a change in the one justified. This may sound reasonable and even biblical, but remember a judge does not improve the moral character of a person in his courtroom: he simply makes a declaration concerning him. Remember, also, that we do not deny that God changes our moral character when He saves us. However that change has *nothing whatsoever to do with justification*.

Thus, according to Rome, in justification God pours (or “infuses”) virtue into the sinner’s heart, which makes him inwardly holy and good. The devilish nature of Rome’s doctrine is that she calls the virtue infused into the soul “grace.” And this “grace” is dispensed through the church in her sacraments and increased in the soul by the performance of pious exercises.

Second, *on the basis of the change wrought in the sinner* by the infusion of virtue (“grace”) into his soul, God declares the sinner to be justified and worthy to receive more grace. Thus, grace is increased in the soul, and the sinner is “further justified.” However, if the sinner commits a serious sin (“mortal sin”) he loses grace, loses justification, and must be “re-justified” by the infusion of more grace, again through the sacraments. Hear what Rome herself says in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), “No one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity and for the attainment of eternal life” (paragraph 2010).

We draw several conclusions. First, Rome teaches that justification is a process. The Bible teaches that it is the finished act of God. Second, Rome teaches that justification is a moral work in the sinner. The Bible teaches that it is a declaration concerning the sinner’s status before the Law of God. Third, Rome teaches that the basis of justification is the sinner’s own righteousness—a righteousness wrought by the Spirit by means of faith, the use of the sacraments and good works. The Bible teaches that the basis of justification is *only* the righteousness of Christ—all the merits and holy works which Christ has performed in His living and dying *for* us.

Rome’s doctrine of justification destroys comfort. How can we know if we are righteous enough to gain salvation? Any sinner who trusts in his own righteousness—whether the works of the law or even those works supposedly wrought by charity and the Spirit in his heart—is lost, because his works can never reach the standard required by God’s Law.

This is a standard which only Christ has met. Away with any other righteousness!

**July 31 – Righteous by Faith Alone**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 3:28: “*Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.*”

In justification, God declares elect sinners to be righteous—to be in perfect harmony with and conformity to the standard of God’s Law, and thus with God Himself—on the basis of the righteousness of another, namely Jesus Christ. That righteousness consists of the “merits and so many holy works” (Art. 22) of Christ—His obedience.

The issue we address now is: how does that righteousness become ours?

And the answer of the Bible is: *by faith*.

Remember that faith is that spiritual bond which unites us to Jesus Christ as well as the activity of believing in Him, which consists of a certain knowledge and a hearty confidence in Him. (Q&A 21 of H.C.) The *Belgic Confession* teaches that faith “embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates, Him and seeks nothing more besides Him.” Notice the verbs: faith *seeks* (and therefore finds) Christ, *embraces* Him and *appropriates* Him; and in so doing faith lays hold of Christ’s righteousness. Moreover, Art. 22 states, faith is “an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness,” and “faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.”

Faith is only an instrument: it is the appropriating organ by which we lay hold of Jesus Christ. It is that which unites us to Jesus Christ and by which what Christ has done for us in life and death becomes ours. Remember the graft: the branch itself is nothing without the graft; but even the graft itself is nothing without the Vine into which we are grafted.

When the Bible speaks of justification by faith—or through faith or “out of” faith—it contrasts the truth with the false teaching of justification by works or justification by the law (or “out of” the law). We do not become possessors of a righteousness pleasing to God by works. We cannot work hard enough to produce such a righteousness of our own; we cannot even work so that we can purchase Christ’s righteousness. This is true for two reasons. First, we can never meet the demands of the law for perfect obedience. Second, we can never satisfy the demands of the law for a payment of our sins. Therefore, justification by works must forever remain an impossibility for sinners.

Paul speaks of the righteousness of God “without the law” (Rom 3:22) and insists that we are justified “without the deeds of the law” (v28). That word “without” means that the law is completely excluded from justification. No law of any kind, not the law of Moses, not the moral law, not the law of love, not the civil or ceremonial law, not the law of nature, *no law at all* justifies a sinner. When it comes to justification, all law is excluded. The righteousness by which we are justified has nothing to do with our keeping the law. Law is completely out of the picture.

Justification by faith and not of works is necessary to exclude boasting. We come to be justified, not bragging about our obedience, but clinging to the obedience of Jesus Christ; and through believing we are justified. *Only* through believing.

**August 1 –Faith: Not the Basis of Justification**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 4:5: “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.”

Justification is the legal declaration of God that a person is in harmony with His Law. The basis for this legal declaration is the righteousness of another, namely Jesus Christ. We receive this righteousness by faith alone without works.

You may have noticed that Art. 22-23 overlap somewhat. That is because they both teach justification by faith alone. In a systematic treatment some issues must still be addressed. What do we mean by “justification by faith alone”? What exactly is the role of faith? That must be clarified.

In every age there have been those who have twisted or perverted the doctrine of justification. The Arminians are guilty of this perversion when they teach that *faith itself* is our justification before God, that is, faith itself is our righteousness. Art. 22 rejects this error: “However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness.” Notice the careful distinction: faith is not the basis or ground of justification, but the instrument or means of justification. This careful distinction comes from a careful study of God’s Word: the Bible teaches repeatedly that we are justified by faith (“through,” “by” faith), but it *never* teaches that we are justified on account of, or on the basis of, faith.

This is true for a number of reasons. First, our faith cannot be the ground of our justification because our faith is imperfect. The faith of the strongest Christian is very weak. Mixed in with our faith are much unbelief and sin. Every Christian can identify with the man who cried out to Jesus with tears, “Lord, I believe. Help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Our faith is, therefore, not a righteous basis for our justification. Second, our faith cannot be the ground of our justification because our faith does not fulfill the demands of God’s Law. Even if our faith were perfect—not weak, imperfect, unstable, changing and faltering—it would not answer the charges of God’s Law against us (we have sinned and deserve death) or the demands of God’s Law concerning us (we owe God lifelong, perfect obedience in love with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength). Only Christ has done that, and therefore only His obedience can be our righteousness or the basis of our justification. The Arminians’ error is to deny God’s justice. They imagine that God will accept something less than perfect obedience—our faith. But then God would deny Himself and would not be just. Such is impossible.

The Arminian objects by quoting Romans 4:5, “his faith is counted for righteousness.” In v3, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.” It would appear that the basis for Abraham’s justification was Abraham’s faith, that faith itself was Abraham’s righteousness. But that is *emphatically not* what Paul is teaching here. First, as with us, Abraham’s faith was weak and faltering. Read Genesis to observe how God had to test and purify Abraham’s faith through trials. Second, faith in v5 refers to the *object* of Abraham’s faith which is Christ. Abraham, even in the days of types and shadows, saw Christ, and believed in Him. God reckoned to Abraham not his faith—as if *that* were something meritorious—but that which Abraham embraced by faith, Jesus Christ and His righteousness.

The same is true for us. Our righteousness is Christ’s righteousness received by faith alone.

**August 2 –The Blessed Non-Imputation of Iniquity**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Psalm 32:2: “Blessed is the man unto whom theLORD imputeth not iniquity ...”

Justification, which is the subject of Art. 23, is not merely the forgiveness of sins. Let us remind ourselves that justification is “God’s legal declaration of righteousness.” In justification God the Judge makes an official legal declaration that the sinner who stands before Him is righteous, that is, that the sinner conforms perfectly to, and is in complete harmony with, the absolute standard of God’s holy Law. That means, negatively, that the sinner is not guilty of any sin—no sin can be laid to his charge. Positively the sinner possesses legally a status of perfect, positive righteousness, because he possesses all of the “merits and so many holy works” (Art. 22) of Jesus Christ by faith.

If we might so speak, forgiveness of sins is only half a justification. Think of a man who stands before a judge accused of a crime. He is found not guilty, and is free to go. But he is not positively righteous! If God merely forgave our sins, we would not go to hell, but we would not be worthy of heaven either. To go to heaven we must not merely have no sins to our account. We must be positively righteous. That is why Art. 23 adds, “[in the remission of our sins] our righteousness before God is *implied*.”

This brings us to the last great biblical and theological word which we must know to understand the doctrine of justification. We looked at (i) “legal, judicial and forensic” (pertaining to law); (ii) “declaration” or “pronouncement;” (iii) “righteousness”. Now we consider (iv) “imputation”: “Christ, imputing to us all His merits ...” (Art. 22) and “God imputes righteousness to him without works” (Art. 23).

To impute means to reckon, to consider, to account something to someone. When something is imputed it is counted as legally belonging to someone, so that either a person bears the responsibility for another’s guilt, or receives the credit for another’s virtue. Paul wrote to Philemon, “If he (Onesimus) hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it” (v18-19). Imputation concerns accounts or records, therefore; and in justification, imputation concerns *legal* accounts or records. Imputation answers this question, “How can the perfect record which Christ wrought in His righteous life become mine; and how can my sinful record of horrible crimes against the Law of God become Christ’s, so that I am not punished on account of my own sins, but am rewarded for the virtues, merits and holy works of Christ?”

In justification God performs a twofold imputation. First, He imputes, reckons or accounts all of our sins to the record of Jesus Christ. Imagine that for a moment! To the sinless, holy, righteous Son of God are imputed all our sins. As it were, Christ says of us, “If my people, whom I love, have wronged Thee or owed Thee anything, Father, put it on My account. I, Thy only begotten and ever beloved Son, have written it in My own blood. I have repaid it.” That is why David speaks of the blessedness of the man “unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity” (Psa 32:2). The Lord has already imputed our iniquity to Christ. Christ, entering the world with our iniquity on His account, was punished for that iniquity—not His iniquity, but ours! That was the solemn responsibility Christ assumed for us in His life and death.

The second imputation—Christ’s righteousness to us—we will see in the next meditation.

**August 3 –Righteousness Freely Imputed**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 4:6: "... the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works"

Yesterday, we began to treat the subject of imputation. We saw that one part of imputation is that God imputed or reckoned the guilt of our sins to the account of Jesus Christ, who thus took full, legal responsibility for our sins, and whom God punished accordingly. Only the doctrine of imputation explains how God was just in punishing His own, only begotten, ever beloved Son in our flesh for *our* sins, which He personally never committed. Legally, in imputation, He assumed the position of one guilty for our sins. And He remained in that state of condemnation—a state of guilt before the Law of God—until He fully satisfied God's justice.

But there is more to imputation—the positive aspect. Remember that Jesus Christ lived a perfect life of obedience to the Law of God. He did more than die on the cross: in the words of the *Belgic Confession*, Jesus Christ performed "many holy works...us and in our stead" (Art. 22). That is the "obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him" (Art. 23). We know that the righteousness of Christ becomes ours when we believe in Him because we have seen that faith is that bond which unites us to Christ and all His benefits. But how exactly does the righteousness of Christ become ours by faith? God imputes that righteousness to us. God reckons to us the righteousness of His Son which is called the righteousness of God. God credits that righteousness to our account.

Think of a legal transaction. We enter the courtroom of God with a criminal record, a "rap sheet" as it is called colloquially by some. On that record are all of our crimes against the Law of God—a very long list of felonies. We are guilty of breaking all of God's commandments, of keeping none of them, and therefore we are worthy of the ultimate penalty, eternal death. In addition, we are guilty—as we learned in Art. 15 on Original Sin—of the original guilt in Adam. God does not reckon any of those crimes to our account. He expunges the record. Those crimes are imputed to another, who Himself has a perfect record—no crimes of any kind, only perfect righteousness. But now we have no record at all—nothing in the "negative column," but also nothing in the "positive column." In double-imputation, God takes the perfect record of Christ—all His holy works, merits and obedience, which we have not performed, and which He performed for us during His life and death—and reckons it to our account. Now, so to speak, we have nothing in the negative column, and we have perfect righteousness in the positive column.

That imputation of Christ's righteousness is the basis for our justification. As far as God's Law is concerned we are righteous, and therefore worthy of all the blessings of eternal life. We are even worthy—because of double-imputation—to be adopted as God's beloved children. Here, then, is the wonder of justification. A condemned sinner facing the death penalty is, after the legal transaction called justification, declared to be an adopted son and an heir of eternal life. The only response to that truth is to cry out with David, "Blessed is the man ...!"

Are you that blessed man (or woman)? Believer in Jesus Christ, you are!

**August 4 – Alien Righteousness**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Philippians 3:9: “And be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”

Alien righteousness! This is not the title of a science fiction novel, or of a Hollywood Blockbuster movie, but is an expression made famous by Martin Luther to describe the righteousness which is the basis of our justification.

When we encounter the word “alien,” we might immediately think of “little green men” from outer space. However, the word “alien” is also used in immigration law to denote a foreigner. The idea of “alien” here, however, is that the righteousness which forms the basis of our justification before Almighty God our Judge has its source outside of us, and indeed outside of this world. It is, in the highest sense, “the righteousness of *God*.” In Romans, Paul writes about the righteousness of God, “Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ *unto all and upon all* them that believe...” (3:22) Notice those words, “unto all and upon all.” Righteousness is not only something which God has and is—He is the God of perfect justice—but something which God gives to and confers upon others.

The righteousness on the basis of which we are justified is called the righteousness *of God*, first, because the Person whose righteousness it is, and who works that righteousness for us, is God. In fact, only the eternal, only begotten Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, could and did work such righteousness. That righteousness is, as Art. 23 explains it, “the obedience of Christ crucified alone.” It is called the righteousness of God, second, because the Holy Spirit, who also is God, worked that righteousness in the life and death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made flesh. It is called the righteousness of God, third, because it is a perfect, utterly flawless and pristine righteousness, sufficient to cover all the sins of all the elect from the beginning to the end of the world. This—the righteousness of God, the alien righteousness of Jesus Christ—is the only righteousness which will be able to satisfy God. God satisfies Himself with His own righteousness.

We can see now why Luther chose “alien righteousness” to describe the righteousness of our justification. This righteousness in no way has its origin in us. We did not produce one scrap of this righteousness. All of our righteousnesses—not just all our sins, but all our righteousnesses!—are as filthy rags (Isa 64:6). Although Paul, as a Pharisee could claim that as “touching the righteousness which is in the law [he was] blameless,” he counted all his legal achievements as “loss” and as “dung” (Phil 3:5-8). Why? Because in comparison to the pristine, perfect, heavenly, alien righteousness of Christ his so-called “righteousness” *was* dung. What a vivid picture that is: a man who stands before Almighty God trusting in the righteousness of the law stands before God dressed from head to toe in filthy, dung-covered rags, and thus is a foul stench in the nostrils of the holy God!

The Reformers rejected all righteousness but the alien righteousness of another, Jesus Christ. God does not justify us on the basis of our personal moral character. We are sinners! God does not justify us on the basis of our imperfect obedience to the Law. He demands perfection because He is righteous. God does not even justify us on the basis of the work of the Holy Spirit *in us*. That work is never perfect or complete in this life. God does not first infuse goodness into us and then *on that basis* justify us. That goodness is never perfect this side of heaven. Only the righteousness of another—the alien righteousness of Christ—is the sure ground for justification

**August 5 – The Righteousness which is of the Law**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 10:5: “For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them.”

We are justified only on the basis of the alien righteousness of another, Jesus Christ, which, as Art. 23 explains it, “becomes ours when we believe in Him”, and adds, “is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God.” A major question and controversy swirling around the time of the Apostle Paul—as the church was emerging from Judaism—and at the time of the Reformation—as the church was emerging from the gloom of medieval Roman Catholicism—was “what about the Law?”

We have seen that the Law must be excluded from justification—that is, we have seen that *our obedience* to the Law must be excluded from justification. This Gospel of justification and righteousness without the law was offensive to the Jews, who highly revered the Law; and one of the charges against the Christians was that they were enemies of God’s Law. This was the false charge against Stephen: “This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy, place and the law” (Acts 6:13). But Paul, although he spoke against the error of finding righteousness and justification in obedience to the Law, never spoke against the Law itself: “The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just and good” (Rom 7:12). The problem is simply this: the Law of God is good, but we are sinners. The Law, Paul writes elsewhere, “was added because of transgressions” and “if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law” (Gal 3:19,21).

The Law of God, then, is good. It perfectly reveals God’s perfect standard and sets forth how a man should behave if he would live in fellowship with God. But, first, the law can only show us what God demands. It cannot give us the strength to perform what God demands. Paul writes that the law “was weak through the flesh” (Rom 8:3). The law itself was not weak, but man’s flesh—his sinful nature—is unable to keep the law; and even the believer is unable to keep the law perfectly. Second, since the law demands perfection, God will curse and condemn the man who does not keep the law to perfection. Paul challenges the man who says he wants to be righteous by keeping the law to realize the terms under which he will be judged. God does not grade on a curve. He demands a perfect score! “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal 3:10). James makes a similar statement, “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (Jam 2:10). You may have heard the expression, “Three strikes and you’re out!” With God’s Law, it is, “One sin and you are damned!” In fact, as we saw in Art. 15, we enter the world under God’s condemnation already because of Adam’s sin.

To seek righteousness in keeping the law, then, is arrogant folly. It is to trample underfoot the righteousness of Christ; it is to insult the Spirit of grace; and it is to bring down upon oneself the full burden of the wrath of God and the curse of His Law. What blessedness that we have the righteousness of Christ—the one who was cursed for us.

Let us come empty-handed into the Judgment of God trusting only in that righteousness.

**August 6 – The Judaizing Error**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Galatians 5:3: “For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law.”

We have seen that the righteousness of the law cannot justify us because, although the law reveals to us God’s perfect standard, we cannot perform it. To this argument theologians in the Roman Catholic church have replied, “But the law to which Paul refers is only the Old Testament ceremonial law. Good works in obedience to the moral law are not excluded from justification.” In the Old Testament there was a threefold law—that will be subject of Art. 25. First, there was the moral law of the Ten Commandments. That law is summed up in the command to love God and the neighbour. Second, there is the civil law which governed Israel as a nation. This included rules concerning agriculture, commerce and civil penalties, such as capital punishment by stoning for various offences. Third, there is the ceremonial law which governed Israel’s worship. This included dietary laws, laws concerning cleanness and uncleanness, and all the ordinances pertaining to the priests, the tabernacle and the temple.

In the early New Testament church, Gentiles were being saved. This was a source of controversy among the Judaizers, certain Jews who professed Christianity but who were really false brethren and heretics. These Judaizers said, “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). These men, also called the Pharisees, insisted that “it was needful to circumcise [the Gentile converts], and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). The church met in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit guided them to reject the teachings of the Judaizers and Pharisees. The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone was preserved!

However, the Judaizers did not give up easily. They infiltrated the churches in Galatia and began spreading their heresy there. Paul’s response was the epistle to the Galatians. In it he exclaimed that those who had turned away from the Gospel of grace to be circumcised had followed another, that is a false, gospel (Gal 1:6); and he pronounced the curse of God on teachers of any other gospel (Gal 1:8-9).

Why did Paul make such an issue about circumcision? Because circumcision represented the works of the law. You might say that the tiniest, most insignificant work of the law—the simple act of circumcision—was the first step on the slippery slope of apostasy from Christ. “Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing” (Gal 5:2). By being circumcised, says Paul, you are not merely submitting to one Jewish ceremony: you are signing up to a plan of salvation which will obligate you to keep the whole law. “For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace” (Gal 5:3-4). And, as we have already seen, with the law it is an “all or nothing proposition.” Put your trust in circumcision, you must keep all the laws of God perfectly.

Instead of putting your trust in circumcision—or in our modern context, instead of putting your trust in baptism, church ordinances, good works, the keeping of the Ten Commandments, or any other work of man—we find all our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Christ will not be half a Saviour, providing only some of the righteousness as the basis of our justification: “If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain” (Gal 2:21).



**August 7 – The Error of the New Perspective  
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Matthew 5:20: “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

There is a movement in the church world today which denies justification by faith alone. This movement is called “The New Perspective on Paul” (NPP). The *Belgic Confession* does not address the NPP as such—how could it when the error in its present form did not exist?—but we should address it. The most popular contemporary proponent of the NPP is N.T. Wright.

Wright redefines the concepts we have carefully studied—justification and righteousness—and rejects imputation. Wright removes justification and righteousness from Soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) and places them in Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). For Wright, justification is not about how a person is saved from sin and blessed with eternal life, but how a person is declared here and now to be a member of the church. In the Old Testament, the “badge” or “mark” of membership among God’s people was circumcision. Gentiles who became Jews in the Old Testament had to be circumcised. In the New Testament, with the coming of Christ, the new “badge” or “mark” must be one which does not exclude Gentiles—circumcision did that—that is, the new “badge” or “mark” is faith. Therefore in the New Testament both Jews and Gentiles are justified—declared to be members of the people of God, the church—by faith. Thus, when Paul argued with the Judaizers about circumcision, he was not arguing about salvation; he was arguing about who is a member of the church.

Righteousness for Wright is God’s faithfulness to His people in putting the world right by the cross and resurrection of Christ. Wright does *not* believe that God imputed our sins to Christ and punished Him in our place. For Wright the cross is simply a display of how righteous God is, and the resurrection is a vindication of that righteousness. Moreover, righteousness, according to Wright, cannot be imputed to a guilty sinner to be the basis of his justification. Thus Wright denies the Gospel and tears down the foundation of our justification before God, leaving us exposed to God’s wrath and curse.

Wright’s “gospel” is that God declares believers part of His people on the basis of faith. However, their remaining as His people depends on their faithfulness to Him (i.e., on their good works). Wright’s conclusion is this: “Future justification, acquittal at the Last Assize, always takes place *on the basis of the totality of the life lived.*” The “Assize” is the judgment.

We repudiate Wright, by “relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone.” (Art. 23). Any follower of Wright’s advice who enters the Judgment relying on the “totality of [his] life lived”—or even on one work—will be damned. Why? Because the good works of the sinner can never even begin to compare with the perfect standard which God demands in His holy Law. What good, then, is a “gospel” which tells us that we might be in God’s favour today, but which announces to us that our remaining in fellowship with God depends on us? If a man understands his sin, he must be utterly beside himself with terror to enter the Judgment relying on himself, and we urge him to flee instead to the perfect righteousness of Christ our Lord. We reject Wright’s “righteousness,” and we abominate Wright’s “justification” as Paul does—dung!

Let us beware of slippery—but popular—heretics such as N.T. Wright!

**August 8 – The Error of the Federal Vision**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 9:6: “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.”

Hot on the heels of the New Perspective on Paul, which we considered yesterday, comes the Federal Vision (FV). These two errors are modern (that is, current), and dangerous, and are a repudiation of the Reformation Gospel of justification by faith alone as summarised in our creeds, such as the *Belgic Confession*.

But some might ask, is it really appropriate to include polemics in meditations? Polemics is the art of theological warfare, the defence of the truth and the repudiation of error. First, the truth always shines more brightly against the background of error. Second, one who loves the truth will fight or contend for it (Jude 3). Third, one who loves the church will not hesitate to raise the alarm when danger threatens. The devil is always seeking to rob the church of truth, and thus of comfort. And if the church has no comfort, there can be no heartwarming meditations—which I hope these articles are. Devotional material is not fluff because the Holy Spirit does *not* comfort us by means of fluff, but by means of the truth applied to our hearts (John 14:16-17).

The FV is an error concerning the covenant. We should remember that the covenant is the gracious bond of friendship which God establishes with us and our children in Jesus Christ, in which He declares Himself to be our God and takes us to be His people. First, the FV teaches a *conditional* covenant, that is, a covenant with many more than the elect, which depends upon man for its maintenance and fulfillment. In practice, this means that *all* the children of believers are elect, regenerated and justified in Christ. But by “elect” and “in Christ” the FV does not mean unconditionally chosen in Christ in eternity and guaranteed salvation. Election in the FV is temporal (pertaining to time), temporary (not necessarily permanent) and therefore can be lost; and since justification—the subject of Art. 23—is a blessing which flows from election, it too can be lost.

Therefore, it is perfectly possible, according to the FV, for a person to be justified for a time, but then to forfeit justification by his sinful behaviour. It is possible for the bond of faith, which supposedly joins all baptised children to Jesus Christ, to be severed by sin. It is possible, says the FV, for a person who is saved in the present to be damned on the Last Day, and thus to perish forever. In fact, it is possible, says the FV, for *every* believer—for you, the believing reader and for me, the believing writer—to perish forever. How, then, are we justified, and how do we remain justified, according to the FV? By covenantal faithfulness! By faithfully keeping the conditions of the covenant—faith and the good works which flow from faith. What, then, is the basis for justification? Not the perfect, imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ—the men of the FV in general oppose the concept of imputed righteousness—but one’s own Spirit-worked, faith-inspired works. All that theological fancy footwork—the works are the Spirit’s works in us and they flow from faith and operate by love—does not hide the fact that justification in the FV is by *works*! If justification is in any sense by works, it is not the utterly gracious justification of the Scriptures. Thus, the FV, too, is a repudiation of the Gospel, and an attempt by Satan to move us away from the only sure foundation—the alien righteousness of Christ, imputed to us.

The only answer to the FV, is that the covenant is unconditional. The blessings earned by Christ on the cross are for the elect only (whether elect adults or children), and they can never be lost. That’s the firm foundation of our salvation—not the treacherous quicksand of the FV!

**August 9 – Simul iustus et Peccator**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 4:5: “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.”

*Simul iustus et peccator* is Latin, and, like the term alien righteousness, was coined by Martin Luther. The phrase means, “at the same time justified and a sinner.”

Justification is God’s legal declaration that a believing sinner is, for the sake of the imputed, alien righteousness of the Son of God, which Christ wrought in His lifelong obedience and atoning, sacrificial death on the cross, *righteous*, that is, that the sinner is in perfect conformity to and in complete harmony with the Law of God. Upon this believing sinner the holy God pronounces the verdict of “Righteous! Not guilty! Worthy of eternal life!”

But the justified person is still a sinner. Paul expresses this very strikingly in Romans 4:5—the one whom God justifies is ungodly! We might have expected Paul to write that “God justifieth the *godly*,” or, at the very least, “God justifies the man *whom He has made godly*,” but instead Paul writes, “[God] justifieth the *ungodly*,” that is, God justifies the one who is, and who remains, ungodly, impious and wicked. The word “ungodly” is consistently used of the wicked in the book of Proverbs, for example. The reader will immediately see the problem: according to Romans 4:5, God does what God Himself forbids human judges to do—they shall “condemn the wicked” (Deut 25:1); “he that justifieth the wicked ....[is] an abomination to the Lord” (Prov 17:15)!

But the problem quickly evaporates when we remember that when God justifies the sinner and declares him to be righteous, He does so on a righteous basis: the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. That is why Paul writes, “that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom 3:26). He is the justifier, and He is just in so justifying!

Therefore we say that the sinner is both righteous and at the same time a sinner, *simul iustus et peccator*. As far as his legal status is concerned, he is righteous. As far as his actual condition—the real circumstances of his life—he is a sinner. In this life we are justified—that is our status before the Law—but we only begin to enjoy the blessings of freedom from the bondage and corruption and sin in this life. We only begin to be holy, and that holiness does not contribute one whit to our justification, which, because it is based upon an alien righteousness, is complete and unchanging.

Thus we confess that justification is *only* a declaration of righteousness. It is *only* the official verdict from the Judge concerning the legal status of the sinner, his relationship to the Law of God. Justification does not change the sinner’s character. This does not, however, mean that the justified sinner will forever remain ungodly, or that he will continue to walk in ungodliness; but it does mean that *justification* has nothing to do with God’s making the ungodly sinner godly. The justified sinner does indeed become godly, but that is a distinct work of God, the work of sanctification, the subject of Art. 24.

Our legal status as justified believers never changes, and God continually testifies of that to us in the Gospel. But, despite our legal status, we are still sinners. We still struggle with and commit sin. Sin does not affect our justification—we are not more justified when we do good works or less justified when we sin—but it does affect our enjoyment and experience of salvation. That is why we, even as justified sinners, continue to pray for the forgiveness of sin.

*Simul iustus et peccator*. The confession of every believing sinner!

**August 10 –Legal Fiction!**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 10:3: “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.”

We noticed in an earlier meditation the Roman Catholic view of justification. Instead of imputed righteousness, Rome teaches *infused or imparted* righteousness, the idea that the Spirit works grace in the heart of the sinner who uses the sacraments of the church. Then on the basis of virtue in the heart—an acquired, internal righteousness—the church member is justified. The more grace in the heart, the more justified a person becomes, but even the most justified person in this life—with very few exceptions—must be purified in purgatory after death. The result is that no member of the Roman Catholic church can ever know if he has accrued enough grace in his heart to merit justification now and on the Last Day. The result for the sinner, who understands sin and the holiness of God, is and must be terror.

Rome scoffs at the Reformed, biblical and confessional view of justification by imputed righteousness as “legal fiction.” Rome is especially offended by the “as if” language of Reformed theologians. We believe that God views us in justification “as if [we] had never had nor committed any sin: yea as if [we] had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for [us]” (LD 23, Q&A 60, H.C.). To “as if” Rome cries out “legal fiction!” Modern heretics have also criticized the doctrine of imputation, characterizing it as “the shuffling about of heavenly ledgers” (or accounting books); and have said that it is impossible for righteousness to be transferred to a guilty sinner from the sinless Christ. These objections come from the NPP and FV movements as we have seen.

The Reformed believer is not afraid of the charge of “Legal fiction!”

First, if our justification is “legal fiction,” how can we possibly explain the cross of Christ? If it is impossible for God to impute Christ’s righteousness to us, it is also impossible for God to impute our sins to Christ, and for Christ to bear the punishment for them. Then we must satisfy God’s justice for our own sins, and that is impossible. Was God playing “legal fiction” at the cross? God forbid! Second, the “legal fiction” argument supposes that God is playing “Let’s pretend” in His judgment hall. God would be pretending that the sinner is righteous when the sinner is, in fact, not righteous. But God is not pretending because the righteousness which is the basis of our justification is not a “make-believe” righteousness but Christ’s righteousness. Christ’s righteousness is *real*! Christ’s lifelong obedience is *real*! Christ’s atonement on the cross is *real*! And God’s act of imputing that righteousness to us is *real*! Third, it is not that the demands of the Law are not met—they must certainly be—but the demands of the Law are not met *by us*. It is not that God agrees not to enforce the demands of His Law—He insists on them most strongly—but that God does not demand them *from us*. And the reason God does not demand perfect obedience from us is that Christ has already fulfilled the demands *for us*. That is not “legal fiction,” but grace!

Let us turn the “legal fiction” charge back on our detractors. All who deny that justification is by faith alone based on the imputed, alien righteousness of Christ alone must face this question. *On what basis* are you justified before God? On what basis can God declare you—here and now, and in the Final Judgment—to be righteous? If God—as Rome, NPP and FV contend—justifies sinners on the basis of an *imperfect* obedience to His Law, God is unjust.

Imperfect righteousness as the basis of justification is the real “legal fiction”!

**August 11 – A Conscience Free From Terror**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Art. 23 ends by rejoicing in the subjective effect of justification upon the conscience of the believing sinner. In one word justification gives peace.

Peace is to found only in God because God is “the God of peace” (Rom 15:33). This means that, first, God is peace, harmony and perfect blessedness within Himself. Imagine a tranquil lake on which there is not the slightest ripple. That is a wonderful image of God in whom there is no agitation, anxiety, confusion or tension. As the God of peace, He is at peace with Himself and He is at peace with all that which is righteous, all that which conforms to and is in harmony with God Himself.

However, the same God of peace is the God who is at holy war against the wicked. Within God there is no agitation but between God and sinners there is enmity. Sinners hate God and show their hatred daily by their sins; and God is justly offended by man’s rebellion and will punish sinners both in time and in eternity in His terrible wrath.

Man is not at peace because man is not righteous. And since man is not righteous God is at war with man and pursues sinful man with His wrath and curse. “The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked” (Isa 57:20-21). All of man’s attempts, therefore, at creating peace are doomed to failure—Christ Himself who takes peace away from the earth (Rev. 6:4) smashes their false “peace” to pieces—because man is unrighteous and at war with God Himself. But in justification God establishes peace between Himself and His people. He does this by removing the cause for the enmity, which is our sin. Christ is our peace (Eph 2:14). Christ is the righteous basis for peace between us and the holy God.

The conclusion is obvious. We who are justified by faith are not only not at war with God but we know ourselves not to be at war with God, and we know that God looks upon us in peace. We know that there is true harmony between us and our God. We enjoy blessed fellowship with the Triune God in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. In other words, we have both objective peace in the cross and subjective peace in our own consciousness.

Contrast that with one who is attempting to justify himself before God by his own works, and who is *not* relying on the perfect obedience, righteousness and merits of Jesus Christ alone. He is following the example of Adam, who “trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig-leaves” (Art. 23). Every child of God knows: “If we should appear before God, relying on ourselves, or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed” (Art. 23). And we can add the testimony of Art. 24, “we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences continually vexed, if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Saviour.”

What about your conscience, reader? Is it “continually vexed” or do you have peace with God? If you are relying upon yourself for justification, you cannot know peace, and God Himself will not declare you righteous and give you peace. That peace, which passes all understanding (Phil 4:7), and which enables a sinner to live and die happily, is the treasured possession of all believers whose only plea is the perfect, imputed, alien righteousness of Jesus Christ alone. Is it yours?

**August 12 – Ascribing All Glory to God**  
**by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Romans 4:2: “If Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God”

Justification is a humbling doctrine. That is why our flesh hates it and unbelievers—especially religious unbelievers—reject it. One who truly believes and understands this doctrine must be humble. Art. 23 urges us to humility by reminding us that in our salvation all the glory is God’s. Of course, it is! God determined salvation in His eternal decree; God set His love upon us, and sent His only begotten Son to work out a perfect righteousness for us as the basis of our justification; God punished His own Son on the cross in our place, thus removing from us the curse of the Law and satisfying His own justice; and God even worked faith in our hearts by the Holy Spirit in order to impute to us by free grace the righteousness of Jesus Christ. “And therefore,” declares Art. 23, “we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him.”

What an abomination to be proud in the presence of God! Are we, perhaps, proud in the presence of man? Do we continue to compare ourselves with others, and imagine, in the vain imagination of our mind, that we are better than others? Never look at the unbeliever with disdain and say to yourself, “I thank God that I am not as other men are. I am glad that I believed in Jesus.” Remember that you have believed in Jesus because God graciously opened your eyes, kindled in your heart a true faith, and united you to Jesus Christ. Remember that you are just as sinful as any unbeliever you meet. The only difference is that your sins are covered by the blood and righteousness of Christ and his are not. Will a man on death row, who has been graciously pardoned, boast because he did something to earn his pardon? Therefore we must never boast as if we contributed something to our justification and salvation. And we may never assume a haughty attitude towards unbelievers.

There is a place for glorying and boasting: it is not *before* God, but it is *in* God. We boast in the grace, mercy and love of God. We boast in the spotless righteousness of God imputed to us. We boast in the unchangeable decree and verdict of justification from God’s judgment seat. But we never boast of what *we* have done. Our justification is not based upon our works. Will a man boast in filthy rags and dung? Our works do not even contribute one stitch to the spotless, seamless robe of Christ’s righteousness.

Here is a good test in evaluating any doctrine, including the doctrine of justification. Does it lead to boasting or does it give all glory to God? Art. 23 states that we do not “presume to trust in anything in ourselves, or in any merit of ours” but that we “rely and rest upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone.” Does your doctrine lead you to *that* conclusion? If it does not, you must quickly reevaluate it, repent and believe the truth.

“Where is boasting then?” asks the apostle. “It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay; but by the law of faith” and later he adds, “If Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory, but not before God” (Rom 3:27, 4:2).

Let us then humble ourselves in the presence of our God, praising and thanking Him that in Jesus Christ He has given us perfect righteousness, and let us never rob God of any part of His glory by daring to ascribe even the smallest part of that righteousness to our own works.

“He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (I Cor 1:31).

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