

DAILY MEDITATIONS ON THE BELGIC CONFESSION

by pastors of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America

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DEC
Articles 34-47

Article 34: Holy Baptism.

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, hath made an end, by the shedding of His blood, of all other sheddings of blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin; and that He, having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, hath instituted the sacrament of baptism instead thereof, by which we are received into the church of God and separated from all other people and strange religions, that we may wholly belong to Him whose ensign and banner we bear, and which serves as a testimony to us that He will forever be our gracious God and Father.

Therefore He has commanded all those who are His to be baptized with pure water, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," thereby signifying to us that, as water washeth away the filth of the body when poured upon it, and is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled upon him, so doth the blood of Christ, by the power of the Holy Ghost, internally sprinkle the soul, cleanse it from its sins, and regenerate us from children of wrath unto children of God. Not that this is effected by the external water, but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and to enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.

Therefore the ministers, on their part, administer the sacrament, and that which is visible, but our Lord giveth that which is signified by the sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace; washing, cleansing, and purging our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving unto us a true assurance of His fatherly goodness; putting on us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds.

Therefore we believe that every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be but once baptized with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same, since we cannot be born twice. Neither doth this baptism avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.

Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers, who we believe ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children. And indeed Christ shed his blood no less for the washing of the children of the faithful, than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of that which Christ hath done for them; as the Lord commanded in the law that they should be made partakers of the sacrament of Christ's suffering and death shortly after they were born, by offering for them a lamb, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ. Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, that baptism is to our children. And for this reason Paul calls baptism the "circumcision of Christ."

December 2 – An End of All Other Sheddings of Blood
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Hebrews 9:22 “And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.”

In Art. 33, we looked at the idea of sacraments in general. Now we consider baptism. Remember two things as we study this important subject. First, we must make a distinction between the sign of baptism (water baptism) and the reality behind the sign (spiritual salvation). Second, sacraments are not only signs, but also seals, or pledges of the goodwill and grace of our God toward us, and therefore not empty symbols. If we bear these two things in mind, we will avoid many errors.

Art. 34 contrasts baptism with circumcision. This is fitting because they have essentially the same meaning. “Jesus Christ,” says Art. 33, “having abolished circumcision ... hath instituted the sacrament of baptism instead thereof.”

To understand baptism, therefore, we examine circumcision.

When an Israelite boy was but eight days old, the priest or his father would remove part of that child’s flesh in a rite called circumcision. This was done according to God’s express commandment. This taught the people that their corrupt flesh had to be cut off, that they had to be cleansed, in order to have fellowship with God. Col 2:11 calls circumcision, “the putting off the body of the sins of the flesh.” What man did with hands, God did spiritually without hands in the heart. Thus, God promised to circumcise the hearts of Israel and of their seed after them (Deut 30:6).

Circumcision was, therefore, *not* a sign of Jewishness, of physical descent from Abraham or of citizenship in the nation of Israel. Circumcision was the sign *of the covenant*, in which Jehovah was Israel’s God and Israel was Jehovah’s people in their generations for an everlasting covenant (Gen 17:7, 11). This must be the case because a sign is a visible thing pointing to an invisible, spiritual reality. Neither physical descent from Abraham nor citizenship in Israel are invisible, spiritual realities, but spiritual circumcision of the heart and covenant membership are.

God abolished circumcision in the New Testament and fulfilled it in the better sign of baptism. He did this for at least three reasons. First, only boys were circumcised. In the New Testament, there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28). Second, circumcision divided Jews from Gentiles. Christ came to unite believing Jews and Gentiles in one body by His sacrifice on the cross (Eph 2:13-16). Third, and most importantly, circumcision involved the shedding of blood. In the New Testament, there is no more shedding of blood. By one sacrifice Jesus Christ has accomplished everything which all shedding of blood in the Old Testament signified and promised. Thus Art. 33 says, “He, having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, hath instituted the sacrament of baptism instead thereof.”

Circumcision was a sacrament. It was a sign and a seal: “[Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of righteousness of [the] faith” (Rom 4:11). In the New Testament the signs and seals are baptism and the Lord’s Supper, both *bloodless* signs and seals of the finished work of our Saviour.

December 3 – Baptism: The Sacrament of Initiation
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

1 Corinthians 12:13: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body...”

God has given two sacraments. Both sacraments are bloodless because sacrifices have ceased with the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross; and both sacraments point to (signs) and assure us of (seals) salvation in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Of the two sacraments, baptism is the sacrament of initiation for by it “we are received into the church of God.”

Remember, again, that the one baptism of Scripture must be distinguished. Real, spiritual baptism (the reality, that which the Spirit performs in the hearts of God’s people) is signified and sealed by water baptism (the sacrament). Not all who receive the sign (water baptism) receive the reality (spiritual salvation in the blood of Christ). Not all who are baptized in water are baptized by the Spirit and truly saved. We must never forget that, lest we fall into the errors of those who seek salvation in water baptism.

According to Art. 34, water baptism as a sign is an initiatory sign, that is, it is the sign and seal of God *bringing us into* the covenant, church and kingdom of God. The Spirit baptises us into Christ at the beginning of our spiritual life, so we are baptized with water as a sign of the beginning of our Christian life.

This explains, too, the use of prepositions in connection with baptism. Prepositions are small but important words in Scripture which describe position or movement. The most common baptismal prepositions are “in” and “into.” Jesus commands that His people be baptized “*in* [lit. “into”] the name of [the Triune God]” (Matt 28:19). Gal 3:27 teaches, “For as many of you as have been baptized *into* Christ have put on Christ.” 1 Cor 12:13 teaches, “For by one Spirit are we all baptized *into* one body.” And Rom 6:3 teaches, “Know ye not that so many of us as were baptized *into* Jesus Christ were baptized *into* his death?” From these passages we conclude that in [real spiritual] baptism, we are brought *into* association with Christ; that we are united to Him in His death and resurrection; that we come into fellowship with the Triune God through Jesus Christ the Mediator; and that we are united to Christ’s spiritual body which is the church. All of these glorious benefits (union with Christ and reception of all His benefits) are signified and sealed to us in the sacrament of water baptism.

Again, we issue the caution. Water baptism neither causes nor brings about these things, nor are these things dependent on water baptism. These things are promised to all believers in the Gospel, and our confidence that these things are real and are given to us personally is strengthened and confirmed by the use of the sacraments.

December 4 – Baptism: An Ensign and Banner
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Song of Solomon 2:4: “He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.”

Remember the illustration we used of the sacraments in previous meditations—a wedding ring. The sacraments are the token and pledge of Christ’s love to His church, reminding her of His faithfulness and assuring her of His tender affection for her as she awaits His Coming. A wedding ring serves another function—it is a mark of ownership. When a man places a wedding ring upon his bride, he says, “You are mine. You belong exclusively to me. You must share your love with no other man.” And when a man sees a wedding ring on the finger of a beautiful woman, that ring speaks: “This woman is married. Do not touch her, lest you anger a jealous husband!”

According to Art. 34, baptism marks us as belonging to Jesus Christ. This ought not surprise us since we have already learned that baptism signifies and seals our union with Jesus Christ (we are baptized *into* Him). Baptism, therefore, acts as an ensign or banner. That figure, too, is familiar to us. Every organisation rallies under a flag of some kind. For the Americans, it is the “Stars and Stripes,” for the British, it is the “Union Flag.” Armies, too, have ensigns and banners under which they gather. The banners are all different, so that one army can be distinguished from another. It would cause utter confusion on the battlefield if soldiers could not identify the banner under which they were fighting.

Spiritually speaking, baptism is the banner under which we rally as soldiers of Jesus Christ. By baptism, Christ marks us as belonging to Him. Negatively, baptism separates us “from all other people and strange religions.” In the Old Testament, there were the circumcised covenant people of God, and the “uncircumcised Philistines.” (Judges 14:3) In the New Testament, there are the baptized people of God (the church) and the non-baptized heathen. Positively, baptism marks us out as Christians: “that we may wholly belong to Him whose ensign and banner we bear, and which serves as a testimony to us that He will forever be our gracious God and Father.”

This has great implications for how we live. A bride who wears the wedding ring of her husband does not live as if she belonged to herself; a soldier who bears aloft the banner of his commanding officer does not live as he pleases; and a Christian who is baptized does not live as if he belonged to the world. Christian parents, who bring their children for baptism, and adult converts, who by baptism are received as members of the Christian church, must remember this.

This solemn responsibility comes upon all baptized members—both adults and children—that we live holy lives in devotion to the one in whose name we are baptized. Those who live in ungodliness deny their baptism. Let us live as baptized believers in gratitude to our Heavenly Bridegroom whose love is confirmed to us in the sacrament of baptism!

December 5 – Baptism: A Washing
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Acts 22:16: "... arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord."

Water baptism is a washing. This ought to be obvious because of the element of water. In baptism we do not *drink* the water, nor do we *drown* the person in water, but we sprinkle or pour the water on the person who is being baptized. Water is the universal cleansing agent, and it is used both in the Old and New Testament to purify from filth or defilement (Ezek 36:25; Heb 10:22)

Even children can understand this very important aspect of baptism. Why do we take showers? Why do we wash our hands? Because we are dirty! Why during the worship service do we bring a person—often a little child—to have water sprinkled upon him? Because in so doing we confess that we and our children are sinners—spiritually dirty, defiled and unclean—and we must be washed.

Baptism tells not only that we need to be washed, but that we *are* washed by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ. Baptism declares to sinners, guilty and worthy of punishment, shameful and polluted by nature, that God *has* cleansed and purified us. Baptism takes our eyes off ourselves and directs our attention to the perfect work of Christ. There on the cross our sins were washed away. And when we see the water of baptism washing the dirt from a baptized person we are reminded of and strengthened in our faith in the power of Christ's blood to cleanse us from sin.

Thus water baptism becomes a seal or a guarantee of spiritual salvation. Do you doubt that pure water has the power to wash away the dirt of the body? Then do not doubt that the blood and Spirit of Christ cleanse you from all sin. Of course, we do not believe that water washes away our sins, even the water used in the sacrament of baptism. It is not magical water! But we *do* believe that the water of baptism is used by God Himself to assure us that Christ's blood washes away our sins. This is because the Spirit is pleased to use baptism to strengthen our faith. All this explains the sacramental language of Art. 34: "signifying to us that, *as water* washeth away the filth of body ... *so doth the blood* of Christ, by the power of the Holy Ghost, internally sprinkle the soul...of all filth and unrighteousness."

How foolish, then, to come to water baptism puffed up with notions of one's own righteousness! One who comes to be washed confesses that he is unclean! But what a beautiful picture we have in baptism of our salvation—just as water cleanses the body, so the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ cleanse us from all sin. Believe that and be comforted!

December 6 – Christ Our Red Sea
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

1 Corinthians 10:1-2: "... all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea..."

In the Old Testament, there are two types or pictures pointing ahead to the reality of spiritual baptism, which reality is now signified and sealed to us in the sacrament of water baptism. The first is the Flood. Of this Peter writes, "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us..." (1 Pet 3:21). The second is the passing through the Red Sea of Exodus 14. Art. 34 makes reference to this second picture: "the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and to enter into the spiritual land of Canaan."

The typology of the passage through the Red Sea is clear. Israel is God's church, loved, chosen and redeemed by the blood of Christ. Egypt is the world of sin and death, especially its enslaving power, with Pharaoh as the tyrant of that world, the devil. Moses is the Mediator of God's people, and therefore a picture of Jesus Christ. He calls us to follow Him and promises to bring us safely into the Promised Land and into fellowship with God there. Canaan is the land where God dwells, and is therefore a picture of heaven. And the wilderness wanderings are a picture of the Christian pilgrimage, a life of trials, and a life lived in faith, following Jesus Christ wherever He leads us. The passage through the Red Sea is the means by which God separates His people from sin and death and consecrates them to God, and the way in which God finally destroys Egypt and the power of sin. Therefore, the crossing of the Red Sea is a type of the cross through which God's people are redeemed. Thus, Art. 34 fittingly and beautifully identifies the crucified Christ as "our Red Sea," and the sprinkling of His blood as the way of our salvation. All of these are signified and sealed to us in baptism.

Several other points we notice from this typology. First, not all the Israelites who experienced the type or picture experienced the reality. All the Israelites were baptized (1 Cor 10:2), but not all were united to Jesus Christ by a living faith. The same is true in the church today: all the members of the church, and all the children of godly parents, are baptized with water, but God gives the reality only to His elect. Second, by baptism unto Moses, Israel was consecrated or set apart unto God and His Mediator, Moses, who is a picture of Jesus Christ. We saw that already when we considered baptism as an ensign and banner. Third, in both pictures of the Red Sea and the Flood, the ungodly were immersed, drowned and destroyed, while God's people were sprinkled and saved. This has implications for the mode of baptism: Art. 34 speaks of sprinkling, not immersion. And, finally, in the passage through the Red Sea, children were baptized. This has importance for the subject of infant baptism in the church today.

What a rich picture God has given us in baptism! Let us use the sacrament believingly and gladly for God's glory and for our own comfort!

December 7 – Not That This is Effected by the External Water
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I John 1:7 "...the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

Baptism signifies and seals regeneration unto us: "the blood of Christ, by the power of the Holy Ghost, [doth] internally sprinkle the soul, cleanse it from its sins, and regenerate us from children of wrath unto children of God." In addition, baptism signifies and seals unto us, "[God's] gifts and invisible grace; washing, cleansing and purging our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving unto us a true assurance of His fatherly goodness; putting on us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds."

As we see the sprinkling of water in the sacrament, we are reminded of these marvellous benefits and assured by the Spirit that these benefits are indeed ours. As the water washes us from dirt, so surely and more so do the blood and Spirit of Christ cleanse us from all sin.

But, lest we trust superstitiously in the sacrament of water baptism itself, Art. 34 adds these words: "Not that this is effected by the external water..."

These words are necessary to confute the errors of Roman Catholicism. At the time of the Reformation and now, Rome taught, and teaches, the error of baptismal regeneration. The *Catechism of the (Roman) Catholic Church* (1994) states, "By baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin" (paragraph 1263). Earlier it teaches, "The sacrament is also called the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit for it signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit" (paragraph 1215). Rome teaches the opposite of the *Belgic Confession*. Our creed declares, "Not that this is effected by the external water..." Rome insists that spiritual salvation *is* effected by the external water.

Rome's error is simple, and deadly. Rome confuses the sign with the reality, and thus overthrows the very nature and meaning of sacraments. Sacraments are signs and seals. They are not, and can never be, the reality which they signify. We will see this again when we look at Rome's errors concerning the Lord's Supper. Rome fails to understand the sacramental union, that Scripture speaks of the sign in terms of the thing signified because of the close connection between the two; for example, it speaks of "the washing of regeneration" in Titus 3:5.

Wisely, however, Art. 34 does not overreact to the errors of Rome. Neither the element of water nor the minister who baptizes can give the reality, but this does not mean that baptism is an empty sign: "our Lord giveth that which is signified by the sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace." We do not seek the reality in water, but neither does God deceive and mock us. God graciously gives the thing signified to us. That's the beauty of our salvation: all of grace!

December 8 – One Only Baptism
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Ephesians 4:5: “One Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

At the time of the Reformation, the Reformed churches battled against the Roman Catholic Church on the left, and against the Anabaptists on the right. Art. 34 is harshly critical of Anabaptism: “*we detest* the error of the Anabaptists.” This is the case, especially because the civil authorities in Europe wickedly grouped all Protestant “heretics” with the radical Anabaptists. Many of the Anabaptists were violent revolutionaries; some were mystics; others had heretical notions of the Person and work of Christ, but all had one thing in common: they rejected infant baptism and insisted on rebaptism for their followers. The name Anabaptism means “Rebaptism.” The spiritual children of the Anabaptists are especially the Baptists and Charismatics.

Against all Anabaptism, Art. 34 insists on *one* baptism. “Every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be but once baptized with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same, since we cannot be born twice.”

The Bible is clear: “one baptism” (Eph 4:5)! The Holy Spirit baptizes all of God’s people *but once* into Christ (Gal 3:27), *but once* into Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom 6:3) and *but once* into Christ’s spiritual body (I Cor 12:13). Just as we are not born again, and again, and again, so we are not baptized again, and again, and again, either with the reality or with the sign of water. Reformed churches, therefore, refuse to baptize again someone who was properly baptized in another church, as long as their previous baptism was valid—with water, in the name of the Triune God and by an ordained office bearer.

But perhaps someone might object. Should we not be baptized over and over again because we sin over and over again? Not at all: “Neither doth this baptism avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.” The Spirit engrafts us but once into Christ, but the effects of that spiritual baptism are ongoing. Martin Luther would often take comfort from his baptism. When doubts and temptations assailed him, he would say, “I am baptized.” By this, Luther was not trusting in his water baptism, but reminding himself of the sign and seal of baptism, that as surely as water washes away the filth of the body, so surely he was washed from his sins in the blood and Spirit of Christ.

An elderly saint can have the same comfort today as he sits in a baptismal service. Many years ago he was baptized with water. He cannot remember his own baptism, and he certainly does not need to seek another baptism, but every time he sees a baptism he is reminded of it: “I am baptized. I have—once and for all—the reality which is signified and sealed to me in water baptism. And believing that, I have comfort.” So do we!

December 9 – The Baptism of Our Children
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Acts 2:39: “For the promise is unto you, and to your children and to all that afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.”

Reformed churches have always practiced infant baptism. We do so, not because we can find an explicit command in the Bible to do so—there is none—but because of God’s covenant promise to our children.

Again, Art. 34 finds a parallel between baptism and circumcision. In the Old Testament, God’s covenant included the children of believers. Therefore, they were marked with the sign of the covenant. Nothing has changed in the New Testament, except the sign itself. In fact, we would be surprised, if under the Old Testament times of types and shadows, the children of believers had greater privileges than they do now under the New Testament with the coming of Christ. That would be the case if children were no longer in God’s covenant. But Peter immediately on the Day of Pentecost assures the people that God’s promise still includes the children of believers—“for the promise is unto you and to your children” (Acts 2:39).

The argument for infant baptism is surprisingly simple. God promises to give to our children the reality of salvation. Therefore, we give to them the sign of that which God promises. Since God is faithful and keeps His promises, we can be assured as Christian parents that God will save and has already saved our elect seed. That is why we treat the children of believers—not the way the Baptists do, as “little vipers,” as unsaved, unregenerate children—but as the lambs of Christ’s flock and the children of God. Thus Art. 34 insists, in opposition to the grievous and distressing error of the Anabaptists, “indeed Christ shed His blood no less for the washing of the children of the faithful than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of that which Christ hath done for them.”

First, children of believers are members of the covenant of God. This means that God says about our children, “I will be their God and Father, to love them, care for them and save them from their sins.” In every manifestation of the covenant, God declared to His people *that He included the children*. Second, children of believers are citizens of Christ’s kingdom. Therefore they are ruled by the Word and Spirit of Christ (Mark 10:13-14; Luke 18:16). Third, children of believers are members of the church. Paul addresses them as such (I Cor 7:14; Eph 6:14; Col 3:20). These promises are not to the children when they grow up but to the children as they are currently, *as children*.

If children have the reality—spiritual salvation in Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of their sins and eternal life—they must be given the sign and seal of the reality. We believe, says Art. 34, that they “ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children.” We do not, as the Baptists do, wait until our children are old enough to confess their faith before we baptize them.

What mercy! Christ washes us and our children from sin in His own blood, and He has given us the sign and seal of baptism to assure us of this truth. In this hope we bring forth and raise children to the glory of His name!

Article 35: The Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ did ordain and institute the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and support those whom He hath already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His church.

Now those who are regenerated have in them a twofold life: the one corporal and temporal, which they have from the first birth and is common to all men; the other spiritual and heavenly, which is given them in their second birth, which is effected by the word of the gospel in the communion of the body of Christ; and this life is not common, but is peculiar to God's elect. In like manner God hath given us, for the support of the bodily and earthly life, earthly and common bread, which is subservient thereto and is common to all men, even as life itself. But for the support of the spiritual and heavenly life which believers have, He hath sent a living bread, which descended from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ, who nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers when they eat Him, that is to say, when they apply and receive Him by faith in the spirit.

Christ, that He might represent unto us this spiritual and heavenly bread, hath instituted an earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of his body, and wine as a sacrament of His blood, to testify by them unto us, that, as certainly as we receive and hold this sacrament in our hands and eat and drink the same with our mouths, by which our life is afterwards nourished, we also do as certainly receive by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul) the true body and blood of Christ our only Savior in our souls, for the support of our spiritual life.

Now, as it is certain and beyond all doubt that Jesus Christ hath not enjoined to us the use of His sacraments in vain, so He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs, though the manner surpasses our understanding and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Ghost are hidden and incomprehensible. In the meantime we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ. But the manner of our partaking of the same is not by the mouth, but by the spirit through faith. Thus, then, though Christ always sits at the right hand of His Father in the heavens, yet doth He not therefore cease to make us partakers of Himself by faith. This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of his suffering and death, nourishing, strengthening and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood.

Further, though the sacraments are connected with the thing signified, nevertheless both are not received by all men. The ungodly indeed receives the sacrament to his condemnation, but he doth not receive the truth of the sacrament - as Judas and Simon the sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament but not Christ who was signified by it, of whom believers only are made partakers.

Lastly, we receive this holy sacrament in the assembly of the people of God with humility and reverence, keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior with thanksgiving, making there confession of our faith and of the Christian religion. Therefore no one ought to come to this table without having previously rightly examined himself, lest by eating of this bread and drinking of this cup he eat and drink judgment to himself. In a word, we are excited by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love towards God and our neighbour.

Therefore we reject all mixtures and damnable inventions which men have added unto and blended with the sacraments, as profanations of them, and affirm that we ought to rest satisfied with the ordinance which Christ and His apostles have taught us, and that we must speak of them in the same manner as they have spoken.

December 10 – A Twofold Life, A Twofold Bread
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

John 3:6-7: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.”

In connection with its teaching on the Lord’s Supper, Art. 35 begins with regeneration. This might be surprising to us, but it is a very fitting approach. There are two kinds of people. First, there is the unregenerate man. God’s Word uses various terms to describe him: “born of the flesh” (John 3:6); “the natural man” (I Cor 2:14) or “carnally minded” (Rom 8:6). The only life of unregenerate people is natural, physical life. Such people do not have spiritual life, eternal life or everlasting life. They are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1) and “alienated and enemies in [their] mind by wicked works” (Col 1:21). Second, there is the regenerate man. He is the opposite of the unregenerate man: he is “born of the Spirit” (John 3:6); “spiritual” (I Cor 2:15) and “spiritually minded” (Rom 8:6). These people are God’s children, believers, to whom God has given spiritual, eternal, everlasting life.

The difference between unregenerate and regenerate people is God’s grace. Graciously, God gives life to some, and does not give that life to others. God quickens (or makes alive) some with Jesus Christ; others remain dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1-4). This life, says Art. 35 is “peculiar to God’s elect.” No man can make himself alive. No man can even desire to make himself alive. God quickens or makes alive whom He wills.

Therefore, God’s regenerate people have a twofold life, whereas unregenerate unbelievers have only one form of life. One life is “corporal and temporal,” that is, it pertains to the body and time. It is that biological life which holds body and soul together and ends at physical death. This life—which is common to both believers and unbelievers—is sustained by physical bread, called “earthly and common bread” in Art. 35. The other life is called “spiritual and heavenly” by Art. 35 because it is worked in us by the Holy Spirit, and has its source in heaven. This life is sustained by a different bread, the “living bread...namely, Jesus Christ.”

To understand the meaning and benefit of the Lord’s Supper, we must have this difference clearly before our minds. One who is dead cannot be nourished by bread, even if that bread is placed before him or even placed in his mouth. Bread is for the living, not the dead! One who is spiritually dead (i.e., unregenerate) cannot be nourished by the Living Bread from heaven, who is Jesus Christ, even if that Living Bread is presented in the preaching of the Gospel and in the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper nourishes only the spiritually alive. It cannot nourish those who have no spiritual life, because it is not designed to support this “corporal and temporal life.”

On the night in which our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed, He instituted the Lord’s Supper, a means of grace to His church, by which we partake of the crucified body and shed blood of our Saviour. By such partaking, the spiritual life of regeneration is nourished and supported. By means of the Lord’s Supper, God’s regenerate, believing people receive the Living Bread, Jesus Christ. This is a great wonder which we will explain in future meditations.

December 11 – Jesus Christ, the Living Bread
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

John 6:33: “For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven and giveth life unto the world.”

In the synagogue of Capernaum Jesus Christ proclaimed to a crowd of unbelieving Jews that He is the Bread of Life.

This caused great offence to the Jews. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:52), they asked. Because the Jews took Jesus’ words literally, they could make no sense of them. The law of God forbade the eating of human flesh and the drinking of blood. The very idea was grotesque to a Jew. Later, Jesus says to Jews—albeit believing Jews, His disciples—“Take, eat; this is my body ... Drink ye all of it, for this is my blood” (Matt 26:26-28). At that time, the disciples—who had been rebuked before for taking Jesus’ words too literally (Matt 16:11-12)—showed no sign of alarm.

In John 6 and Matt 26, Jesus spoke figuratively, but what He said was very significant. First, Jesus makes the bold claim that He—the carpenter from Nazareth—actually came down from heaven. This caused the unbelieving Jews to murmur at the seeming impossibility of it (John 6:33, 41-42). Second, Jesus compares Himself to the life-sustaining manna given by God through Moses to God’s people in the wilderness (John 6:31-32). Manna was necessary to keep the Israelites physically alive. Without the manna they would have perished of hunger in the hot, dry, waste howling wilderness (Deut 32:10). Jesus Christ is even more necessary for the spiritual life of His people—He is not an optional extra, a luxury perhaps, but essential to our life. This caused the unbelieving Jews to murmur because they knew Jesus’ family in Nazareth and would not believe His words (John 6:42). Third, Jesus shows that His flesh must be broken and His blood must be shed. Only a crucified and risen Jesus can save us from our sins, and impart life: “The bread that I will give is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51). Fourth, Jesus shows that a man can only be nourished by the Bread of Life, which is the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, by eating and drinking Him: “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink His blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life ... For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed” (John 6:53-55). These last two points caused the unbelieving Jews to murmur. They knew He was not inviting them to commit cannibalism, but what did Jesus mean?

That Jesus was speaking figuratively here ought to be clear. Thus Art. 35 describes Jesus Christ as one who “nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers when they eat Him, that is to say, *when they apply and receive Him by faith in the spirit.*” This is exactly the explanation which Jesus gives in John 6:35, “I am the bread of life: *he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.*”

Christ is the Bread of Life, and we feed on Him in the Lord’s Supper *by faith*. Only by faith.

December 12 – An Earthly Representative of a Spiritual Bread
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Matthew 26:26: “Take, eat; this is my body.”

The Lord’s Supper is a sacrament, and we remember that a sacrament is two things—a sign and a seal. That the Lord’s Supper is a sign of the crucified body and shed blood of Jesus Christ means that the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are visible symbols or representations of something spiritual which we cannot see. The bread and wine are not the things they represent. If they were, they would not be signs, and the Lord’s Supper would not be a sacrament.

Christ, understanding the weakness of our faith and our incapacity to comprehend spiritual things, has given us an earthly bread to represent a heavenly bread. We know what earthly bread is—the food which we take in with our mouths, digest in our stomachs and which nourishes our physical life. We have seen what heavenly or spiritual bread is—Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came in our flesh, was crucified, died and buried, and who has risen again for us. Therefore, He calls Himself the Bread of Life. He is the vital food for our souls.

What, then, is the relationship between these two “breads”?

To this, several answers have been given. The *Belgic Confession* does not identify the different views, and does not name the controversies swirling around this question at the time of the Reformation, but we can briefly set them forth. The Roman Catholic Church taught, and still teaches, **transubstantiation**. The Roman Catholic believes that the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper (which Roman Catholics call the Mass) have *changed*. Here are Rome’s own words: “in the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore the whole Christ, is truly, really, and substantially contained” (*Catechism of the [Roman] Catholic Church*, paragraph 1374). Rome’s view is that the entire substance of the bread and the entire substance of the wine have changed, so that there is no bread and wine, only the body and blood of Christ. Thus, the two “breads” are identical. One bread (the earthly) has changed into the other bread (the heavenly). Lutheranism rejects transubstantiation, but still insists that Christ’s physical body is present *in* the Lord’s Supper. That view is called **consubstantiation**, the idea that the body and blood of Christ are “in, with and under” the bread and wine. Thus, the one bread (the heavenly) coexists with the other bread (the earthly).

We reject both transubstantiation and consubstantiation. Christ’s physical body and blood are not present in the Lord’s Supper. If they were, the sacrament would no longer be a sign. Instead, the one bread (the earthly) is a sign (a representation) of the other bread (the heavenly).

But, does that mean, then, that the Lord’s Supper is *merely* a sign? Not at all! It is also a seal as we shall see in our next meditation.

December 13 – He Works in Us All That He Represents To Us
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Corinthians 10:16: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?”

One of the great dangers in theology is overreacting to the errors of others. This is a great temptation when studying the truth about the sacraments and the Lord’s Supper in particular. Rome, as we noted yesterday, teaches transubstantiation. Even the Lutherans believe in some kind of physical presence of the body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Should we not distance ourselves from such teaching by insisting that the Lord’s Supper is *merely a symbol with no presence of Christ whatsoever*?

That is the view, commonly called Zwinglianism, which is advocated by many Evangelicals. For them any idea of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper sounds suspiciously like Roman Catholicism. The Reformed—especially Calvin—resisted the temptation to overreact, and taught that Christ’s body and blood *are* really present in the Lord’s Supper.

In other words, the Lord’s Supper is not only a sign, but also a seal. A seal is a guarantee of the authenticity of something. It is, as Art. 33 explained, a “pledge of the good will and grace of God toward us.” If this is the case, the Lord’s Supper must be more than a mere symbol, a pious remembrance of the death of Christ. To be a seal, the Lord’s Supper must actually impart Christ to us; we must really partake of Him; we must feed upon Him; we must have real fellowship with Him. And these things are only possible if Christ is really present to feed and nourish us with His own body and blood as He promised. We want to do full justice to the words of the Apostle Paul: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” (I Cor 10:16). Communion means sharing or partaking!

About this matter, Art. 35 is emphatic. It speaks of “the true body and blood of Christ” and even “the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ.” It insists that Christ has not given us the sacrament “in vain.” It reminds us that “He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs.” This, says the *Confession*, is “certain and beyond all doubt.”

When the Bible says that the bread *is* the body of Christ and the wine *is* the blood of Christ, it speaks sacramentally. It speaks of one in terms of the other, or it speaks of the sign in terms of the thing signified. This is because of the close connection between the two. Thus we read in the *Belgic Confession* those typical sacramental phrases: “*As certainly* as we receive and hold this sacrament in our hands ... we also do *as certainly* receive by faith ... the true body and blood of Christ our only Saviour in our souls, for the support of our spiritual life.” We do not doubt that by eating earthly bread our earthly life is nourished; so we must not doubt that by feeding on Jesus Christ (which we do by a believing partaking of the Lord’s Supper) our heavenly and spiritual life is nourished.

And, by eating and drinking, we have real communion with our Lord Jesus Christ.

December 14 – The Spiritual Presence of Christ
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Acts 3:21 “Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things.”

It is a common misconception that Roman Catholics believe in the “real presence” of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, and that the Reformed do not. In fact, the Reformed emphatically and vigorously defend the “real presence” of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Consider what Art. 35 says: “we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ.”

By “proper and natural” we do not mean the *physical* body and blood of Christ. That is impossible. First, Christ’s body and blood, being real human flesh and blood, belonging to a real human nature, cannot be in more than one place at once. Certainly, it cannot be at the Right Hand of God in heaven, *and* also on communion tables in thousands of churches across the world. The real human nature of Christ has the properties of a real human nature. Christ’s body, albeit glorified, is not, and cannot be, omnipresent, or fill heaven and earth. Second, Christ’s spatially limited human nature—with His flesh and blood—is at the Right Hand of God in heaven. “Christ always sits at the right hand of His Father in the heavens,” asserts Art. 35. Since that is the location of the body of Christ, it is not on earth.

But this does not mean that Christ is absent when we partake of the Lord’s Supper. We do partake of Him! If we do not partake of Him, the Lord’s Supper cannot be a means of grace to us, and it cannot strengthen and nourish our souls. But Christ has to be present in a way which nourishes our *souls*. Let us imagine, for the sake of argument, that Christ’s physical body and blood were present in the Supper. What good would that do our *souls*? Eating flesh and drinking blood, even the flesh and blood of Christ, cannot nourish the soul, any more than eating bread and drinking wine can nourish the soul. The eating and drinking of Christ, and therefore the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, must be *spiritual*.

At this point, we should allow the careful and modest language of Art. 35 to make an impression upon us: “the manner surpasses our understanding and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Ghost are hidden and incomprehensible.” Can we understand how Christ, who is at God’s Right Hand, makes us “partakers of Himself”? Can we fathom how Christ, without physically leaving Heaven, “communicates Himself with all His benefits to us”?

To help us understand, and to assure us that it is so, Christ has given us the Lord’s Supper. We receive the earthly bread as a sign and seal of the heavenly bread, and by receiving the heavenly bread, we are spiritually nourished by Christ who is spiritually present in the Lord’s Supper—really present, to feed, not our bodies, but our souls!

December 15 – Faith, The Hand and Mouth of the Soul
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

John 6:35: “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.”

We have seen that in the Lord’s Supper, Christ is really—spiritually but not physically—present. This is the only way in which the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper could be of benefit to us. If we could eat and drink the physical body and blood of Christ—and we cannot—our souls would not be nourished, and the Lord’s Supper would be some kind of grotesque cannibalism!

This raises the question—how can our souls *eat*?

We know how we eat physically. Food is placed before us, and we use our hands or cutlery (knives, forks and spoons) to put the food into our mouths. But what about our souls? We cannot use our hands or cutlery to put food into our souls. We cannot even take the piece of bread and the cup of wine given to us by the minister in the Lord’s Supper and place those into our souls. How, then, do we eat spiritually?

Art. 35 contains a beautiful answer. We receive Christ by faith, which is “the hand and mouth of our soul.” The soul has a hand and mouth by which it partakes of spiritual food—the hand and mouth of faith! Thus, Art. 35 underlines this truth: Jesus Christ “nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers when they eat Him, that is to say, when they apply and receive Him *by faith* in the spirit;” “we...receive *by faith*...the true body and blood of Christ our only Saviour in our souls”; “the manner of our partaking of the same is not by the mouth, but by the spirit *through faith*”; Christ does not “cease to make us partakers of Himself *by faith*.”

This, of course, means two things. First, unbelievers do not partake of Christ or feed on Him when they sinfully partake of the Lord’s Supper. An unbeliever is like a man coming to a table laden with good food, but who has no hand and no mouth. He cannot feed on Christ. He has no desire to feed on Christ. His soul is without a mouth and a hand! Second, even believers can fail to partake of Christ because they do not come in faith. Again, the figure of faith as the hand and mouth of the soul is helpful. A man could conceivably come to a table laden with good food, but refuse to stretch out his hand or open his

mouth. Such a man does have a hand and a mouth but he refuses to use them. He starves! Prov 26:15 comes to mind: “The slothful hideth his hand in his bosom: it grieveth him to bring it again to his mouth.”

Three things we believe as we come open-mouthed to the Supper. First, we believe that we are great sinners, and we are sorry for and humbly confess our sins. Second, we believe that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross has satisfied the justice of God against our sins, and we trust only in that sacrifice of Christ for our salvation. Third, we resolve to live a new and godly life. In coming to the Lord’s Supper, we desire our faith to be strengthened.

Thus, we must hear the exhortation: “Open thy mouth wide and I will fill it” (Psa 81:10). Come to the preaching and to the sacrament with the hand and mouth of your soul wide open to receive the good things of Jesus Christ. Come, partake of Christ, by faith.

December 16 – Examine Yourself Then Come
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Corinthians 11:28: “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup.”

Christ calls His people to come to the Lord’s Table. The holy sacrament is for sinners, who are saved by grace, sorry for their sins, and heartily thankful for salvation. The desire of such believing sinners who come to the Lord’s Supper exercising faith—which is the hand and mouth of the soul—is to be spiritually fed, nourished and strengthened.

Because the sacrament is holy, those who come to this spiritual feast must come in the proper manner. The bread and wine are holy, not because of any change in their substance, but because by the Spirit they have been separated from common food and drink to be holy symbols of the crucified body and shed blood of Jesus Christ. Those who are too young to understand this, or those who are carnal and unbelieving and who do not consider this, risk eating and drinking judgment to themselves, “not discerning the Lord’s body” (I Cor 11:29).

Therefore, God demands self-examination of those who would partake of the Lord’s Supper. We must understand this self-examination, because many are confused by it. We do not examine ourselves in order to ask ourselves the question, “Am I a true child of God?” We examine ourselves, already believing that we are true children of God, with these questions, “Am I living as a child of God? Am I walking in the faith of Christ?” By this I mean, “Is there a sinful way in which I am walking?” If so, we ask the Lord to reveal that way to us, so that we might confess our sins and repent of them. We do not torment ourselves with these kinds of questions: “Am I sorry enough for my sins? Is my life holy enough? Is my experience of conversion deep enough? Should I wait until I am holier?” The Apostle does not write, “Let a man examine himself, *and then let him stay away,*” but “*and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup*” (I Cor 11:28). The *Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper* includes this beautiful statement: “But this is not designed (dearly beloved brethren and sisters in the Lord) to deject the contrite hearts of the faithful, as if none might come to the Supper of the Lord but those who are without sin.” The Lord’s Supper is for sinners, with weak faith, with a small beginning of the new obedience; for those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

The Lord’s Supper, however, is not for unbelievers. An unbeliever cannot piously remember the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross. By his unbelief and other sins, he tramples Christ underfoot. Shall he then take the holy signs and seals of Christ’s body and blood, when by his life he shows utter contempt for everything Christ did on the cross? God forbid!

The Lord’s Supper is a fellowship meal. Christ is the gracious host. We are His forgiven friends, and we sit at His table in humility and reverence, marveling that we—who do not even deserve the crumbs under the table—may sit and feast with Him and on Him by faith!

December 17 – Nourishing, Strengthening, Comforting, Quickening, Refreshing Our Poor Comfortless Souls
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Mathew 5:6: “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.”

The Lord’s Supper is a feast. The table of the Lord is laden with good things. The call goes out to God’s believing, penitent people: “Come, hungry and thirsty souls, and be spiritually nourished! Come, empty souls, and be spiritually filled! Come, weary and burdened souls, and be spiritually refreshed! Come, dejected and afflicted souls, and be spiritually comforted!”

We do this, of course, when we come to Jesus Christ Himself by faith, as He is set forth in the preaching of the Gospel. The preaching, not the sacraments, remember, is the chief means of grace. But we also do this when we come believingly to partake of the Lord’s Supper—as Art. 35 puts it with “the hand and mouth of our soul” (faith) wide open.

Christ is pleased to give us His crucified body and shed blood in a spiritual manner in the Lord’s Supper. He is able to make us partake of Him, although His physical body and blood are in heaven. Some have objected to the Reformed view because they cannot conceive of how we can eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ if He remains in heaven and we on earth. But distance does not prevent Christ imparting His body and blood to His children. Why? Because the exalted Lord Jesus is vitally connected to His body (and to every member) *by the bond of faith*. Through the bond of faith—which the Holy Spirit creates at the point of regeneration—all of the benefits of Christ flow to us from Christ. Through faith we partake of His goodness, just as the branches partake of the sap of the vine, and all parts of the body are supplied by the head (John 15:5; Eph 4:16; Col 2:19, etc).

In moving language, Art. 35 describes the spiritual blessings we receive when we partake believingly of the Lord’s Supper. We do not leave the table empty!

We come with “our poor comfortless souls.” In this world of sin and death, we have no source of comfort or life. We are sinners who struggle with the flesh, the devil and the world, and that struggle makes us weary. We see ourselves in this description of “poor” and “comfortless.” But, in the Lord’s Supper, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself comforts, strengthens, nourishes, quickens and refreshes us. He does that because the Lord’s Supper—like the preaching and like baptism—directs us to one place: the cross. If any doctrine of the Lord’s Supper points us anywhere else—to our works—it is of no benefit to us, and it is a dangerous and wicked deception, one of the man-made “mixtures and damnable inventions” against which Art. 35 warns us.

The Lord’s Supper reminds us, and assures us, that as surely as we receive with a believing heart the bread and wine, so surely did Christ give Himself on the cross for the salvation of our souls. As the *Form for the Administration* puts it: “as often as ye eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you shall thereby, as by a sure remembrance and pledge, be admonished and assured of this My hearty love and faithfulness towards you;”

And by doing that, bringing us again to the cross, where we find all our salvation, in the Lord’s Supper, the Lord Jesus is “nourishing, strengthening and comforting” and “quickening and refreshing” our poor comfortless souls, by making us feed on Him, the Living Bread!

Article 36: The Magistrates.

We believe that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, hath appointed kings, princes and magistrates, willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies, to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency. For this purpose he hath invested the magistracy with the sword, for the punishment of evil-doers and for the praise of them that do well.

Their office is not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship¹; that the kingdom of antichrist may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted. They must therefore countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by every one, as He commands in His Word.

Moreover, it is the bounden duty of every one, of what state, quality, or condition so ever he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates; to pay tribute, to show due honor and respect to them, and to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God; to supplicate for them in their prayers, that God may rule and guide them in all their ways, and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates and would subvert justice, introduce a community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God hath established among men.

¹ **NOTE:** This phrase, touching the office of the magistracy in its relation to the Church, proceeds on the principle of the Established Church, which was first applied by Constantine and afterwards also in many Protestant countries. History, however, does not support the principle of State domination over the Church, but rather the separation of Church and State. Moreover, it is contrary to the New Dispensation that authority be vested in the State to arbitrarily reform the Church, and to deny the Church the right of independently conducting its own affairs as a distinct territory alongside the State. The New Testament does not subject the Christian Church to the authority of the State that it should be governed and extended by political measures, but to our Lord and King only as an independent territory alongside and altogether independent of the State, that it may be governed and edified by its office-bearers and with spiritual weapons only. Practically all Reformed churches have repudiated the idea of the Established Church, and are advocating the autonomy of the churches and personal liberty of conscience in matters pertaining to the service of God.

"The Christian Reformed Church in America, being in full accord with this view, feels constrained to declare that it does not conceive of the office of the magistracy in this sense, that it be in duty bound to also exercise political authority in the sphere of religion, by establishing and maintaining a State Church, advancing and supporting the same as the only true Church, and to oppose, to persecute and to destroy by means of the sword all the other churches as being false religions; and to also declare that it does positively hold that, within its own secular sphere, the magistracy has a divine duty towards the first table of the Law as well as towards the second; and furthermore that both State and Church as institutions of God and Christ have mutual rights and duties appointed them from on high, and therefore have a very sacred reciprocal obligation to meet through the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and Son. They may not, however, encroach upon each other's territory. The Church has rights of sovereignty in its own sphere as well as the State." Acta. Synod, 1910.

December 18: Magistrates Appointed Because of Man's Depravity
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Romans 13:4: "... But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain..."

Art. 36 deals with the subject of the civil magistrate or the state. This subject is immensely practical for all Christians because all of us live as citizens under an earthly government of one kind or another. The Bible has a lot to say on the role of the civil government and even more to say on the Christian's obligation to government. God is a God of order, and He has ordained authorities in various spheres: the family, the church and the civil government.

This article begins by explaining the reason—indeed the necessity—of civil government. There are, and always have been, anarchists, who desire to overthrow all civil government. They desire liberty from all forms of human government because they fear tyranny. Nevertheless, the Bible does not support an absolutely libertarian view of government. In fact, the Bible does not even mandate what form government should take—whether absolute dictatorship, totalitarian and despotic states, kingdoms, empires or the various forms of democracy known to many of us today. Democracy, as such, was unheard of in the days in which the Bible was written. In the Old Testament, there was either the theocratic state of Israel—God was king in Israel and He ruled through His office-bearers the kings, especially the Davidic kings—or various forms of tyrannical government, such as Pharaoh's Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon or Cyrus's Persia. In the New Testament era, the dominant form of government was the Roman empire. Believers in the Old and New Testaments recognized and honoured the leaders placed over them. Paul summarises this in Rom 13:1, "... the powers that be [that is, the powers which *exist*] are ordained of God."

The reason God has ordained government ("kings, princes and magistrates," as Art. 36 explains it) is "because of the depravity of mankind" and "to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained." Dissoluteness is unbridled wickedness. The French word used in the original version of the *Belgic Confession* means "overflowing," the idea being that man's sin will flow unchecked without civil government.

Those who advocate the overthrow of government (such as the Anabaptists) often have a poor understanding of sin. Without civil government, man's sin will not be restrained. Imagine how many more murders, thefts and other crimes there would be, if there was no police force; if there were no prisons; and if—in some cases—there was no death penalty inflicted upon offenders! A corrupt government is better than civil unrest and anarchy. But we must not make the mistake of thinking that civil government restrains man in such a way that he becomes better morally. Civil government does not improve man—he is still totally depraved. Civil government restrains a man the way a muzzle restrains a violent dog.

"Our gracious God ... hath appointed kings." He has done so for the good of His church which is called to live in the midst of a sinful world. This, too, is part of His care for us.

December 19: The Sword Power of the Magistracy
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Peter 2:14: "... for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well."

There are many theories about the role of the state. Political opinions vary between the "left" and the "right," between "limited government" and "totalitarianism." Some men favour capitalism and others socialism or even communism. The Bible does not contain detailed instructions on the role of the government. In fact, the government really has one function and this can be summed up in one short phrase: "sword power."

God "hath invested the magistracy with the sword," says Art. 36, following Paul's instruction in Rom 13. "He [the civil power] beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (v4). The sword in Scripture is symbolic of the power and authority to coerce, force and punish the wicked and to promote virtue in society so that the wickedness of man might be restrained and good order maintained. Modern governments do not use the steel sword. They use a well trained army with modern weaponry, a police force with various government agencies, a justice department and a network of prisons. Some still inflict the death penalty, but death by beheading by the sword is extremely rare. Modern governments also concern themselves with other aspects of the lives of her citizens—education, employment, social welfare, finance, etc.—but these are not the state's function according to Scripture.

We noticed in Art. 30-32 that the church does not have sword power. She has a much greater power—the power to open and close the kingdom of heaven with the keys; the power of spiritual weapons; the power of the sword of the Spirit (Matt 16:18, 18:18-19; II Cor 10:3-5; Eph 6:17). In fact, the church *may not* use the sword. The magistrate, however, whose kingdom is not spiritual, *must* use the sword. God wills it! The magistrate who allows criminals to escape unpunished and the magistrate who punishes the innocent will be judged by God.

How must we view the power of the sword? First, we must not envy it. The church has a greater spiritual power than the magistrate could ever dream about! Second, we must fear it. Writing to Christians, Paul warns, "If thou do that which is evil, be afraid" (Rom 13:4). Christians are not exempt from arrest, prosecution and punishment if—and may God graciously forbid—they transgress the civil law. Peter, again writing to Christians, warns, "But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or an evildoer ..." (I Pet 2:15). A Christian who commits a crime will go to prison, let's say, even if he is repentant and is forgiven by the church. Third, we must be thankful for it. Let us be thankful that God has ordained that there be prisons for thieves who might break in and steal our property; that there is the death penalty for murderers, rapists and other violent offenders. Let us be thankful for the police, the judges and the soldiers whose job is to protect us and to maintain law and order.

No government is perfect. Many governments are overly intrusive, rapacious in their taxation, wasteful in their spending of taxpayers' money. Many governments are tyrannical—increasingly so as the end approaches—and corrupt, failing to punish the wicked and refusing to reward the good. That was the case in Paul's day also. Paul wrote Rom 13 in the context of the Caesars of Rome, hardly a power friendly to the Christian church!

But for all that Paul wrote, "The powers that be—whether a Roman Emperor such as Nero or the president, prime minister or king of your country—are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God ..." (Rom 13:1-2).

December 20: The Relationship Between Church and State
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Timothy 3:16: "... the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

Art. 36 is the only one with an explanatory footnote. This is because the Reformed churches have debated the relationship between the church and state, and have concluded that the *Belgic Confession*—while reflecting what the Reformers believed and taught—is not in line with Scripture, and needs to be corrected. No church may take the revision of her creeds lightly, but at the same time no creed is infallible.

The article, in its original form, mandated the magistrate to promote the true church and to suppress heresy with the power of the sword. That this was the prevalent view throughout the Middle Ages and in Reformation days, no scholar denies. The Reformers, especially Calvin, as well as the Roman Catholics, believed that the magistrate had the role to enforce the law of God. A Latin phrase, *cuius regio eius religio*, sums up the principle. It means, "Whose the realm, his the religion." In Europe, there were Reformed areas, Lutheran areas and Roman Catholic areas, and this could change with the change of leadership. In England, for example, the rule swung from Protestant to Roman Catholic and back to Protestant again, depending on who occupied the throne. There were also varying degrees of religious freedom as well examples of intolerance and persecution. In some European countries, even today, there are "Established Churches," churches officially recognized by the state. This recognition comes at a high price—interference by the state into the affairs of the church. Often the state would determine the office-bearers of the church, call or forbid ecclesiastical assemblies, determine worship practices and pay for the upkeep of property and the salaries of ministers. *He who pays the piper calls the tune!*

The Reformers, who argued that the role of the magistracy was to "protect the sacred ministry and thus [to] remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship," appealed to the Old Testament examples of godly, reformatory kings such as Josiah and Hezekiah. These men did put idolaters to death, purge the temple and promote the worship of the true God. However, upon reflection, we have come to understand that this appeal was mistaken. The Old Testament Israel was a "state religion," but in the New Testament, the church (and not the state) is the spiritual, "holy nation" of God (1 Pet 2:9) but without an earthly king. Christ's kingdom is not of this world—it is not a political power. It is wholly separate and distinct from the civil state (John 18:36-37).

The civil government has neither the calling nor the competency to "remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship." How could the civil government determine what is true and false worship? And besides this, the civil government does not have the calling to enforce the Ten Commandments of God's Law. The Law of God is not an external moral code, but "holy, just and good" (Rom 7:12), a law which governs the sinner's heart. The civil magistrate can punish murderers, but can it mandate love for the neighbor from the heart? The civil government can punish theft, but can it forbid and punish envy, discontentment and covetousness?

We—with the footnote to our beloved *Belgic Confession*—reject the Establishment Principle and teach a separation of church and state. The state must promote true religion only in *this* sense: the state must preserve order so that the church can worship in peace; and the state must not persecute or interfere with the true church as she does her work of preaching the Gospel. When the state oversteps her bounds, the state sins. But the church does not rebel; she suffers patiently, waiting for the coming of her Lord.

December 21: Our Duty to Submit to Magistrates
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Titus 3:1: “Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work.”

The calling of the Christian with respect to the civil government is to submit. Submission is the deliberate, conscious placing of oneself under the authority of another. Submission is not exactly the same as obedience, although in most instances, a submissive person is also an obedient person.

A submissive Christian recognizes several truths.

First, he understands that God is sovereign and that He, in His providence has given power to rulers. This is the case whether the person occupying the office—whether of king, queen, judge, police officer, president, prime minister, senator, congressman, etc.—is good or evil, a believer or an unbeliever. God’s word is clear: “the powers that be—and not the powers as we would like them to be, or as they are according to some idealistic, political ideology—are ordained of God” (Rom 13:1). This truth is taught everywhere. To despotic King Nebuchadnezzar Daniel declares, “Thou, O king, art a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, strength and glory” (Dan 2:37). Later he adds, “... the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever He will, and setteth up over it the basest of men” (Dan 4:17). The same is true in the New Testament: *God* ordained that Nero be emperor when Paul was writing the book of Romans. *God* ordained your civil leaders, whether you like them or not. And a righteous civil ruler is rare in this world.

Second, the Christian understands the Fifth Commandment. He interprets this Commandment in an all-comprehensive way: it includes the command to obey parents, the civil magistrate, one’s employer and ecclesiastical office-bearers. Peter writes, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man *for the Lord’s sake*; whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by Him ...” (I Pet 2:14). We obey our parents in the Lord; we obey our masters as to the Lord; and we submit to rulers for the Lord’s sake (Eph 6:1; Col 3:22-23; I Pet 2:14).

Third, the Christian understands that this requirement is valid even when the leaders are ungodly, as they often are. A Christian wife’s submission is not conditional on her husband’s love for her; a Christian employee’s submission is not conditional on his employer’s equitable treatment of him; and a Christian citizen’s submission is not conditional on the government’s righteous treatment of him or on the government’s establishment of godly laws and ordinances (I Pet 2:18, 3:1). The calling of the government is “not [to be] a terror to good works, but to the evil” (Rom 13:3), *but its legitimacy does not depend on its doing this*.

Some Christians object that we are not required to submit to an unjust government, but this objection does not fit with Scripture. If we are not required to pay taxes to, obey the laws of, and recognize the legitimacy of a wicked government today, how could the apostles have required these things of Christians in their day? (Rom 13:6-7; I Pet 2:13-15).

Our calling is clear—and difficult for the flesh. We must submit to the government, obey her laws, pay our taxes and suffer wrong if that becomes necessary. If we have legitimate avenues of appeal, we may use them, but in all things, we must be loyal, obedient citizens, indeed the best citizens of the nation in which we sojourn.

All to the glory of God.

December 22: We Must Obey Except ...
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Acts 5:29: “... we ought to obey God rather than men.”

Earlier, we underlined the truth that the Christian must submit to the government, no matter what kind, and even when it fails to do God’s calling to punish evildoers and reward the good. However, this does not mean that the Christian *obeys* the government at all times.

Submission is to place oneself under the authority of another. Obedience is to do what a superior says. Even when a Christian may not, in good conscience, obey, he must be submissive. We might say that he must disobey submissively. A wonderful example of this is found in Daniel’s three friends. Notice how they address the king—respectfully, politely, humbly and submissively. “O, Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter...be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods” (Dan 3:16, 18). But, for all that, they disobey! Paul is respectful and submissive to authorities, even to authorities which mistreat him (Acts 21:37, 23:5, 24:10, 26:2,25). We must, therefore, not speak evil of our leaders, slander them, make fun of them or teach our children to disrespect them.

Nevertheless, we do not obey our leaders when they command us to disobey God. Then we follow the principle of Acts 5:29, “...we ought to obey God rather than men.” Those occasions, where we are called to disobey God, are rare. Is it disobedience to God to pay taxes to a government which uses those taxes to fund immoral practices? No. We are called to pay our taxes (Rom 13:7). Did Rome’s taxes not fund her military, her oppression of the people of God, her gladiatorial shows, her idolatry and the emperor’s excesses? Paul did not exempt Christians from paying tax for those reasons. Is it disobedience to God to curb one’s speed on the highway or to comply with the multiplicity of regulations imposed by politicians today? No. Peter says we must “submit [ourselves] to every ordinance *of man* for the Lord’s sake” (1 Pet 2:13). You might find man’s ordinances illogical, foolish and inconvenient, but unless obeying man means that disobeying God, you must obey. The example given in Acts is when the apostles, who were commanded to preach Christ Jesus, were told not to do so by the Sanhedrin. The apostles rightly answered that they must obey God rather than men. But in everything else the apostles obeyed the laws of the magistrates as submissive citizens of the state.

In modern democracies, of course, the Christian has more options. The Christian can criticize the government. John the Baptist did this. The Christian can appeal to or petition the government to change its laws for the better. The Christian can even run for public office—this is an avenue open to the individual believer, although politics are not the calling of the church institute.

But, what the Christian may never do, is to rebel against the government. That is sin.

December 23: Detesting the Sedition of the Anabaptists
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

John 3:6-7: "...They that resist shall receive to themselves damnation"

The *Belgic Confession* was written against the backdrop of severe persecution of the Reformed churches by the civil magistrate, Philip II of Spain, who at that time ruled the Netherlands. This violent persecution occurred at the behest of the Roman Catholic church, which viewed the Reformed as heretics to be exterminated. But, despite the injustice of the state, the Reformed did not advocate rebellion. In fact, in church history, when the Reformed rebelled, the end has always been disastrous.

Part of the justification which the Roman Catholics gave for the persecution of the Reformed was that they were seditious. This was slander. There were seditious persons at the time of the Reformation. There were men and women who sought to overthrow rightful, God-ordained authority. There were men and women who rejected civil magistrates, and who said that the church must establish a godly kingdom on earth by overturning existing rulers. These were the Anabaptists. Their teachings are condemned more than once in the *Belgic Confession*. The most radical Anabaptist leader was Thomas Müntzer, who was put to death in 1525 for his part in the Peasants' Revolt. Not all Anabaptists were radical. Some, like Menno Simons, were strict pacifists. The *Belgic Confession* was written to distance the Reformed from the Anabaptists. The authorities found it convenient to lump all heretics together, but this was unjust. In 1562, a copy of the *Belgic Confession* was sent to Philip II. In it, the Reformed declared themselves ready to obey the government in all lawful things, although they would "offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire, rather than deny the truth of God's Word." Thousands of godly, Reformed Christians were put to death by the authorities, a fate they patiently endured for the sake of Christ.

Godly Christians throughout history have been loyal citizens, ready and willing to submit to God-ordained authority. It has been the radicals and the fanatics who have sought to overthrow law and order. "We detest the Anabaptists", declares Art. 36, "and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates." Jesus gives this principle, "Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt 26:52). He that takes up arms against the government will perish, and deservedly so. "They that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (Rom 13:2). Consider the Jewish zealots of the first century AD. They were fanatical Jews who sought to overthrow the Roman oppressor by force. One of Jesus' disciples had been a zealot (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13) and Barabbas and the thieves crucified with Jesus were undoubtedly zealots (Luke 23:18-19,32-33,40-41). The Roman government was illegitimate in their view, its laws were ungodly, its taxes were unfair and oppressive, it did not reward the good and punish the evil. But none of that justified rebellion.

The calling of the Christian is to suffer patiently when he is unjustly treated. No Christian or instituted church may ever rebel against the government. All such rebellion is sin.

December 24: Praying for Civil Rulers
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

1 Timothy 2:1-2: “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving of thanks, be made for all men, for kings, and for all that are in authority...”

How often do you pray for the civil magistrate? Do you pray for the government as much or as often as you complain about it? Do you imagine that praying for the government would be a waste of your time? Perhaps those thoughts crossed Timothy’s mind when he received Paul’s epistle. In 1 Tim 2, Paul begins to give instructions on public worship and “how [he ought] to behave [himself] in the house of God, which is the church of the living God (3:15). The first thing Paul mentions is the need to pray for all men. The context shows us that Paul does not mean all men head for head—how could anyone ever do *that*?—but all kinds of men. Timothy might imagine that it would be fitting to pray for old and young, rich and poor, male and female. But then Paul adds, “for kings, and for all that are in authority” (v2).

Does that surprise you? It may have surprised Timothy. Pray for “kings”—for men like Herod, Nero—and for “all that are in authority”—for men like Felix, Festus, Pilate! Perhaps you can think of rulers today you would rather not mention in your prayers—unscrupulous politicians, corrupt judges, arrogant and ungodly men and women. Perhaps the church in Ephesus could think of persecutors of the church. Should we pray for *them*? Jesus commanded, “...and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matt 5:44).

Art. 36 reminds us of this calling too. “It is the bounden duty of every one...to supplicate for them in their prayers, that God may rule and guide them.”

Scripture gives several reasons for this. First, God will answer our prayers in such a way that “we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim 2:2). God guides civil rulers so that the right atmosphere will prevail in which the church can worship and live as Christians. If anarchy prevails in society, public worship becomes impossible and the work of the church in preaching the gospel is greatly hindered. Second, God wills that we pray for civil rulers—as part of the “all men” of v1—because God wills the salvation of all men, and He has sent Christ to be a ransom for all men. This does not mean that God desires the salvation of every human person without exception. The context demands that “all men” in v1, 4 and 6 be understood as “all kinds of men.” This is also how the words are used in everyday speech. If I greet a group of people with, “Good evening all” nobody understands that to mean that I am greeting anyone but the immediate group to whom I am speaking. If I say, “Everyone needs to be finished by 3 o’clock” it is obvious that I have all *of a specific number* in mind. The extent of “all” must always be determined by the context.

God wills even the salvation of some kings and other civil rulers. Although “not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Cor 1:26), God is pleased to save some such. Remember Elector Frederick, who commissioned the *Heidelberg Catechism*, King Edward VI of England, who was called the *English Josiah* by his grateful subjects, and, of course, the godly kings in the Old Testament (David, Josiah, Hezekiah, etc).

Let us, then, pray for and be thankful for our civil rulers under whose hand our gracious God is pleased to govern us.

Article 37: The Last Judgment.

Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, when the time appointed by the Lord (which is unknown to all creatures) is come, and the number of the elect complete, that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty to declare Himself judge of the quick and the dead, burning this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it.

Then all men will personally appear before this great Judge, both men and women and children, that have been from the beginning of the world to the end thereof, being summoned by the voice of the archangel and by the sound of the trumpet of God. For all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived. As for those who shall then be living, they shall not die as the others, but be changed in the twinkling of an eye, and from corruptible become incorruptible. Then the books (that is to say, the consciences) shall be opened, and the dead judged according to what they shall have done in this world, whether it be good or evil. Nay, all men shall give an account of every idle word they have spoken, which the world only counts amusement and jest; and then the secrets and hypocrisy of men shall be disclosed and laid open before all.

And therefore the consideration of this judgment is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly, but most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and the elect; because then their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labor and trouble which they have borne. Their innocence shall be known to all, and they shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked, who most cruelly persecuted, oppressed and tormented them in this world; and who shall be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences, and, being immortal, shall be tormented in that everlasting fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels.

But on the contrary, the faithful and elect shall be crowned with glory and honor; and the Son of God will confess their names before God His Father, and His elect angels; all tears shall be wiped from their eyes; and their cause, which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious, will then be known to be the cause of the Son of God. And for a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive.

Therefore we expect that great day with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN.

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus." – Revelation 22:20.

December 25 – The Time Appointed by the Lord
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Psalm 90:4: “For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as watch in the night.”

In our day, men and women are interested in eschatology or the doctrine of the last things. Surprisingly, the *Belgic Confession* devotes only one article—the last—to this subject. This is because, apart from the error of purgatory, there was little difference between the Reformed, Lutherans and Roman Catholics on the last things. There was also very little doctrinal development in the area of eschatology.

The Apostle’s Creed was concise: “From thence He [Christ] shall come to judge the quick [living] and the dead.” All of Christendom believed in a future, personal, visible, glorious coming of Jesus Christ to resurrect and then judge all the living and the dead. However, we shall see why on one hand, the Reformed derived great comfort from the coming of Christ as Judge, whereas on the other, the medieval Roman Catholics were terrified by the prospect. What a comfort the Gospel is! What a difference the Gospel makes!

Although the *Belgic Confession* devotes only one article to the Second Coming, what it teaches us is significant and beautiful. The Reformed understand the Second Coming of Christ as the glorious day which will bring history and all of God’s purposes with this present creation to a close. Just as history and creation had a beginning in God’s counsel, so they have a determined ending. That ending is known only to God and its exact moment is hidden from all creatures—even from Christ Himself according to His limited human soul (Mark 13:32). If the Son of God Himself according to the flesh did not know, we can be sure that God has not revealed that day to any creature—not even foolish doomsday preachers such as Harold Camping!

It must be of great comfort to us as we see the unfolding of history around us—a history which is often chaotic, confused and frightening—that the future is not in the hands of men and nations, or even in the hands of the devil. The future is in the hands of God. “Known unto God are all His works from the foundation of the world” (Acts 15:18). Therefore, history cannot either end one moment before God has determined or continue one moment longer than He has planned. Art. 37 calls this “the time appointed by the Lord.”

We might wonder why history must last so long. Why has the church had to wait for some 2,000 years since the Ascension of Christ? Peter answered that question in his second epistle. Scoffers arise who question this: “Where is the promise of His coming?” (II Pet 3:4). The answer is that God “is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (v9). This does not mean that God desires the salvation of all humans. That would not give a reason for the seeming delay in Christ’s return. It does not mean that God is giving as many as possible a chance to be saved. It means that God is longsuffering (which *is* salvation, v15) to us (not to everyone, but to us), because He is not willing that any (of us) should perish, but that all (of us) should come to repentance.

In other words, Christ shall come when “the number of the elect [is] complete.”

Will you be among that number? If you are a believer, you must know that you will be.

December 26 – Christ’s One Future Visible Coming
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

1 Thessalonians 4:16 “For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God ...”

According to Art. 37, “our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty.” It is important to remember that the Reformed do not accept the teaching of Premillennial Dispensationalism that the Lord will come twice in the future, once secretly in a “rapture” and then later visibly in a “revelation.” These meditations are not the place to examine Premillennial Dispensationalism in any detail, but we should contrast briefly what Art. 37 says, and this popular doctrine.

Those who believe in the doctrine of the rapture often appeal to I Thes 4. They believe that at any moment, the Lord will secretly snatch away all faithful Christians from the earth. This will cause great consternation because suddenly millions of people will disappear without trace! After the rapture, history will continue and God will pour out His wrath upon the world of those left behind—unbelievers and unfaithful Christians. After seven years of awful tribulation (mostly for the nation of Israel), Christ shall return visibly and destroy His enemies to set up an earthly kingdom for one thousand years in Jerusalem. After the period of one thousand years is complete, the Lord will crush one final rebellion of Satan. History will then end with Christ’s judgment of the wicked.

Art. 37 contradicts that scheme in several ways. First, when Christ returns, the wicked will be oppressing *the church*—there is no indication that the church will have been removed from the earth. Second, “all the dead” shall be resurrected and “all men will personally appear before this great Judge” on the same day—there is no indication that the resurrection of the wicked and the just (and their judgments) will be separated by a number of years. Third, the one, future, visible coming will be “with great glory and majesty”—there is no indication that He will come secretly.

I Thes teaches the very opposite of a secret, silent, invisible coming of Christ to take away His church. On the contrary, Christ shall ascend “with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God”—an event so loud that it shall summon the dead to judgment! Moreover, when Paul writes that “the dead in Christ shall rise first,” he does not mean they shall rise some 1,000 years before the wicked, but that the dead in Christ shall rise before those who are alive at Christ’s coming. Paul’s concern was to comfort the Thessalonians concerning their dead, believing relatives—will they be missed out since they have died before the Second Coming? Absolutely not!

The hope of the saints is not that they be snatched away secretly, but that they—whether dead or alive at His Coming—partake in His glory which is publicly to be revealed.

Is that your hope?

December 27 – Christ Coming With Great Glory and Majesty
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Matthew 24:30: "... and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory."

The most glorious and awe-inspiring day of history is in the future. It will be the last day, the culmination of all things, the bringing to an end of the purpose of God with this present creation. It will be the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Art. 37 speaks of Christ coming "with great glory and majesty to declare Himself Judge." Many passages of Scripture describe that Day, both as a warning for the wicked and as a comfort for the godly. Let us examine some of the aspects of that Day.

First, Christ Himself shall come personally. Christ comes in other senses in Scriptures—He comes to the believer at death to take him to Himself; He came at Pentecost in the outpouring of the Spirit—but the Second Coming will be a personal coming. I Thes 4:16 says "the Lord *Himself* shall descend from heaven." Art. 37 uses the word "corporally" which means bodily. Second, Christ's coming will be visible—not an invisible "rapture", not a mystical, spiritual coming, but a coming which all men shall see. "They [that is, all the tribes of the earth] shall see the Son of man coming" (Matt 24:30). "Every eye shall see Him" (Rev 1:7). This means that the Lord Jesus Christ—who presently is at God's Right Hand in heaven and whom no mortal eye can see—will suddenly be revealed for who He is. Heaven will be opened and He shall come forth, and everything which veils Him from our view shall be removed. Christ describes His coming in terms of lightning flashing across the sky. None will be able to miss it or to ignore it. "For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matt 24:27). Third, Christ's coming will be audible. He will not come sneaking on tiptoe into this world, but with "a shout" (I Thes 4:16) and "with a great sound of a trumpet" (Matt 24:31). Art. 37 speaks of all men, women and children "being summoned by the voice of the archangel and by the sound of the trumpet of God." A trumpet makes a long, sharp, loud blast which no one can miss. The trumpet was God's instrument for gathering His people to attention—Christ's trumpet will arrest the attention of all mankind. This is the final call of God to all men: stand to attention, my Son is here. Look up, church, and see your salvation; look up, wicked, and behold your doom! Fourth, Christ will come with great glory and with the trappings of deity. "They shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Matt 24:30). The clouds are not fluffy, white clouds on a cool summer's day. The clouds are thick, dark, awesome, billowing thunderclouds. In the Bible, Jehovah rides on the clouds (Psa 104:3)—so does Christ!

That awesome day will be the end of the world. "The sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her light ..." (Matt 24:29). "The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall also melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (II Pet 3:10).

But we who believe in Jesus Christ and who watch for His coming will rejoice in that day. For us it will be the beginning of something unutterably wonderful.

December 28 – All the Dead Shall Be Raised Out of the Earth
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

John 5:28: “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear His voice.”

The Coming of Christ is connected to three main events. Art. 37 describes them. First, “all the dead shall be raised out of the earth.” Second, “the books...shall be opened, and the dead judged.” Third, Christ shall “[burn] this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it”.

When we die, our souls are separated from our bodies. The souls of believers ascend into heaven into the presence of Christ, while the souls of the wicked descend into hell to be punished (Luke 16:22-24). The bodies of believers and unbelievers alike decay and perish, returning to the dust from which God made them. The Bible speaks of Christians sleeping in Jesus because, although they enjoy conscious fellowship in the soul with Christ after death, their bodies sleep in the ground until the day of their resurrection. This separation of body and soul at death is temporary—and those who are alive at the Second Coming will not experience such a separation because they will not experience physical death. It is God’s promise to us that we will be saved both in soul and body. Therefore our bodies must also be resurrected and partake of the glory of Christ. “We look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according as He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself” (Phil 3:20-21).

Art. 37, reflecting Scripture’s teaching, explains this marvelous truth: “For all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived. As for those who shall then be living, they shall not die as the others, but be changed in the twinkling of an eye.”

Several aspects of this truth are highlighted by our *Confession* here. First, there is a certain continuity between the body we have now and the one we will have in the resurrection. It is the same body (“proper bodies in which they formerly lived”). Christ will not make us brand new bodies which in no way resemble our human bodies. This is necessary because of the justice and mercy of God. It would be unjust for God to punish another man’s tongue for his swearing, another man’s hand for stealing, another man’s eye for lusting; and it would not be a gracious reward to reward another man’s tongue for praising and another man’s hand for ministering to the saints. This is also necessary for redemption—Christ redeemed me (body and soul). Therefore, I will have *my* body on the Last Day! Second, there is a radical difference between our bodies as they are now and our bodies as they shall be. Quoting from I Cor 15:51-52, Art. 37 reminds us that we shall “be changed in the twinkling of an eye.” Perhaps you do not like your body, but the main reason we should be (in a holy manner) dissatisfied with our present body is that we cannot serve God as we want. These bodies—even the healthiest and most beautiful specimens—are affected by sin. In our renewed resurrection bodies, we will be able to serve God in a higher, freer and better way than ever before.

Paul uses a beautiful figure of the sowing of a seed (I Cor 15:37, 42-44). When you plant an apple seed, you do not expect it to remain an apple seed, but at the same time you do not expect a thorn bush! You expect an apple tree—more glorious than an apple seed but essentially the same.

Thus shall our resurrection bodies be—bodies glorified, fitted for heaven!

December 29 – And the Dead Shall Be Judged
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Revelation 20:12: "...and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works."

One of the reasons for the resurrection of the dead is that they be summoned to judgment. Christ will not judge disembodied souls, but all men, women and children will be judged in their bodies. This is fitting because human beings consist of body and soul; and because human beings commit good or bad deeds in the body as well as in the soul.

This is a summons which no man will be able to ignore. Perhaps when a bailiff comes with the summons from an earthly judge, a man might be able to flee, escape or pretend not to be at home, but the power of Christ will draw every man, woman and child who has ever lived to His judgment seat. Rev 20 describes the awesome scene: "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them; and they were judged according to their works" (v13). Rev 6 describes the terrified cries of the wicked when they see the Judge coming. "[They] hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of His wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" (v15-17).

Scripture makes clear that the Final Judgment will be a glorious occasion for Christ. He will be the Judge! In the courtroom, the judge has a certain, august presence. He is addressed with "Your Honour." To Christ the Triune God is committed *all* judgment. What glory, honour and majesty for Christ! Those who once judged Him will themselves be judged. Those who escaped judgment in this world, and whose crimes were never uncovered will face a far more strict and exacting—and yet perfectly righteous judgment at Christ's judgment seat. Matt 25:31-32 describes the scene: "When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory. And before Him shall be gathered all nations..." Paul speaks of that day, "when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance...when He shall come to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe" (II Thes 1:7-8, 10).

The judgment of mankind will happen on one day—the wicked and the righteous together. It will be a public judgment, so that everyone shall see the outcome and justice will not only be done, but will be seen to be done with respect to all men. Art. 37 underlines the public nature of the Judgment in these words: "All men shall give an account of every idle word they have spoken, which the world only counts amusement and jest; and then the secrets and hypocrisy of men shall be disclosed and laid open before all."

There are many aspects of the Judgment Day which remain unknown. How will God make known all the works performed by all men? The Bible says that the "books shall be opened"—which Art. 37 interprets as "consciences." How is it possible to judge every man who has ever lived in the space of one day? How long will that take? These things might cause unbelievers to mock the idea of a judgment, but we believe what is written.

Judgment is coming—is the Judge also your Saviour?

December 30 – Justly Terrible and Dreadful to the Wicked
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Matthew 24:30: “...then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

A guilty man fears the judge. A criminal fears the police who come to arrest him on the order of the judge. The guilty naturally flee from judgment because they know that they will be punished for their crimes. If that is true with earthly judges, who have the power to cast into prison or even to put a criminal to death, how much more is it true with respect to the Judge of all men, Jesus Christ? The Day of Judgment, the last day of human history, will be a day of unspeakable horror for all the wicked.

Consider the wicked who will be alive at that Day. One moment, they will be living carelessly, foolishly and in disobedience to God; the next moment they will look up, see and hear the Coming of Jesus Christ—the coming of the one in whom they have not believed, whose Word and Gospel they have spurned; the one whom they have disobeyed, mocked and blasphemed, and have hated. Jesus says that when He comes, the people shall “mourn” (Matt 24:30). That word does not mean that the wicked shall repent—the wicked are too stubbornly wedded to sin to repent—but that they shall wail inconsolably with great and intense anguish. The word “mourn” means to beat upon one’s breast. Despair will fill their souls because they will know that there is no escape from the One they hated! Naked they will stand in their sins before Christ, trembling to hear the awful verdict which shall send them away into everlasting punishment.

The *Belgic Confession*, written during severe persecution, describes the punishment of the wicked. God’s people “shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked, who most cruelly persecuted, oppressed and tormented them in this world.” Later, Art. 37 speaks of Christianity “which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious.” Imagine the consternation of a man like Nero (d. AD 62), the Emperor of Rome, who crucified, burned alive and tortured Christians, when he stands before Christ to be judged. Imagine the wailing of a man like the Duke of Alva (d. AD 1582), who persecuted the Dutch believers at the time of the writing of the *Belgic Confession*, when Christ summons him to give account for his wickedness. Imagine the anguish of Mary I of England (dubbed “Bloody Mary”, d. 1558), under whose reign many Reformed believers were burned at the stake, when she must answer for her crimes. Or consider some of the wicked persecutors of the Old Testament: Antiochus Epiphanes IV (d. 164 BC) or Nebuchadnezzar (d. 562 BC). All these—and many others whose persecution of the church is less well known—will have to stand before Christ to be judged. For them there will be no escape.

And the Day of Judgment will be only the beginning of a misery which will last forever. Art. 37 describes it: “[they] shall be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences, and, being immortal, shall be tormented in that everlasting fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:46).

There is only one way to avoid this awful, eternal punishment – in Jesus Christ and Him alone. Are you found in Jesus Christ by faith, clothed in His righteousness? Then rejoice. This doom will not be yours. Are you unbelieving and impenitent? Flee from the wrath to come to Jesus the only Saviour!

December 31 – Expecting That Day With A Most Ardent Desire
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Mat. 25:34: “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

The Day of Judgment sometimes troubles believers. Will *we* really be judged as well as the wicked? Should that not make us fear the Day of Judgment—will that not make that Day less desirable for us?

These fears are based on a misconception—judgment is *not* the same as condemnation. The wicked shall be judged with a view to their public condemnation. We will be judged as well, but with a view to our public acquittal and justification. The Bible makes it clear that both the elect and reprobate, and the righteous and wicked shall be present in the Judgment. In Matthew 25 Christ has all nations stand before Him, and He separates them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. In Romans 14:10-11, II Corinthians 5:10 and Revelation 20:12 we learn that all shall stand before the Judgment Seat. But there is a world of difference between a man who stands before a judge as guilty, and a man who stands before a judge as acquitted!

Moreover, our sins—even our most secret—will be exposed on the Day of Judgment, as well as all of the deeds which we performed which were unrewarded and unnoticed by men. This must not frighten us either, because we will not experience guilt, shame or embarrassment before the Judgment Seat of our Saviour. This aspect of the Judgment is necessary for two reasons. First, the whole world must see how unworthy we are of salvation, so that our God is seen to be the gracious God who freely forgives. Second, we must see how terrible our sins are, so that we understand with unmistakable clarity that our salvation is all of grace, and so that we praise God for His mercy. Besides, our sins will be displayed as forgiven sins, sins not held against us, sins not imputed to us, sins for which Christ has made atonement and sins which He has washed in His own blood. What a surprise this will be to the wicked—that Christian whom they mocked for refusing to join in their sins; that Christian whom they condemned as heretical and impious will be declared innocent. And what a joy it will be for us, who will hear the verdict from the Judge—“This one is my son, my daughter. I have loved him, I have loved her. See my righteousness covers his sins, her iniquities.” The *Belgic Confession* describes that day thus: “Their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labour and trouble which they have borne. Their innocence shall be known to all ... the faithful and elect shall be crowned with glory and honor, and the Son of God will confess their names before God His Father and His elect angels.”

No wonder, therefore, the *Belgic Confession* encourages us to look forward to that day—the day of our public acquittal, the day of our glorification, the day of the fullness of our salvation! No wonder Paul calls it “that blessed hope and the glorious appearing” (Tit. 2:13). That day, says our *Confession*, is “most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect” and “we expect that great day with a most ardent desire.”

Does your soul burn in passion within you? Will you look forward to your vacations and not to that great day?

Come Lord Jesus, yea, come quickly!

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