

“Giving to us His Son to Die, by a Most Perfect Love”

An Exposition of Article Twenty of the Belgic Confession.

Article 20: The Justice and Mercy of God in Christ

We believe that God—who is perfectly merciful and also very just—sent his Son to assume the nature in which the disobedience had been committed,¹ in order to bear in it the punishment of sin by his most bitter passion and death.² So God made known his justice toward his Son, who was charged with our sin,³ and he poured out his goodness and mercy on us, who are guilty and worthy of damnation, giving to us his Son to die, by a most perfect love, and raising him to life for our justification,⁴ in order that by him we might have immortality and eternal life.

¹ Rom 8:3 ² Heb 2:14 ³ Rom 3:25-26; Rom 8:32 ⁴ Rom 4:25

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” There is probably not a Christian alive who does not know this verse from memory. Yet, is there anyone reading this who can recite Romans 3:25 from memory? *“Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.”* Both of these verses tell us something very important about the death of Jesus Christ. But why do we tend to memorize verses which speak of the love of God while often overlooking those verses which speak of the justice of God? This question brings us to the topic of Article Twenty of the Belgic Confession which deals with the justice and mercy of God in Christ. It also brings us to one of the greatest problems in the Christian church today, a sentimental understanding of the cross.

We move from those articles dealing with our Lord’s incarnation (Eighteen and Nineteen) to those dealing with the work of Christ (Twenty and Twenty-One). In fact, we cannot speak of our Lord’s person—the Word who became flesh, who possesses two distinct natures (one divine, one human) joined together in one person (Jesus of Nazareth)—without also speaking of our Lord’s saving work on our behalf. The person and work of Jesus Christ are inseparably linked. Jesus Christ is that redeemer promised throughout the Old Testament, even from the moment of the fall of our race into sin. Jesus is also the mediator of the covenant of grace, making him the only mediator between sinful men and women and the Holy God.

But the work of Christ does not occur in a theological vacuum. The reason, perhaps, that so many Christians discuss the cross in sentimental, mystical and even romantic terms, is because the context in which the Son of God hangs upon the cross is so easily forgotten. As we have seen throughout our time reflecting upon our confession of faith, there is a reason why the Son of God came to earth to take to himself a true human nature—and that reason has nothing whatsoever to do with how wonderful we are. Rather, the reason why the Son of God suffered and died upon a Roman cross, has to do with the gravity of our crimes and the greatness of the debt we owe to God because of our sins. Why is bail set so high

for savage killers and terrorists? Does it show us how valuable they are to us? Or rather, does their multi-million dollar bail indicate how seriously we regard their crimes? Obviously the latter is the case. In the cross of Jesus Christ we do not see the goodness of the human race, as one preacher recently put it, “God loved us so much he bought the whole field just to get the treasure out.” Instead, in the cross we see the horrible consequences of sin and what it cost the sinless Son of God to redeem us from these sins. In the cross of Jesus Christ, we see both God’s love and his justice.

While our confession follows a very systematic and logical order, this order is not far removed from the flow of the redemptive history as God’s plan of salvation unfolds in the Bible. It is important to keep in mind that the cross of Jesus Christ is not the opening chapter in the story of our redemption. The crucifixion of our Lord comes only at the mid-point in the story—a great deal has gone before and there are a number of things yet to come. If we want to make sense of both John 3:16 and Romans 3:25, as well the rest of the Bible’s teaching about the cross without sentimentalizing God’s love at the expense of his justice, or coldly discussing the legal nature of the transaction taking place on the cross without at the same time considering the limitless love of God in offering up his dear son for our sins, then we must put the cross in its biblical context. That context is not human worth, nor human goodness, but human sin, guilt, and alienation, all of which springs from the fall of Adam, the father of the human race.

This is why the cross of Jesus Christ is not an afterthought or cosmic accident. The cross is the only means by which the holy God can deal with human sin so as to demonstrate his love for lost and fallen sinners while at the same time satisfying his holy justice. In articles Fourteen and Fifteen, our confession recounts how Adam, who is both the biological and the federal head of the human race, was placed under a covenant of works in Eden. This covenant demands perfect obedience while threatening the supreme curse for disobedience (death) while promising the supreme blessing for completing a time of probation (an eternity in God’s presence).

Acting on behalf of each one of us, Adam broke God’s command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thereby committing the supreme act of treason. This is why we are guilty for Adam’s sin. This also explains why we are born with a sinful nature (the flesh), so that we sin, willingly and with great glee from the earliest moments of our lives. We will never understand the love of God nor the sufferings of Jesus Christ upon Calvary’s cross if we don’t understand what happened to the human race when Adam fell. In Adam we all sinned. In Adam we all die. In Adam we all inherit a sinful and corrupt nature. Not one of us deserves God’s love or favor.

In Article Sixteen, our confession reminds us that our redemption from sin begins in eternity past when God decrees to save a multitude of Adam’s fallen race from this sin, a multitude so vast that they cannot be counted. God did this because he is merciful. God could have annihilated the world after Adam’s sin and started over since he is not obligated to save any guilty sinner. Our redemption comes about for one reason—God is merciful. And yet, at the same time, God is perfectly just. He manifests this justice by passing over all those not chosen for salvation, eventually punishing them for their own sins and for their sin in Adam. The simplest way to express this is as follows; God’s elect receive mercy, while the non-elect (the reprobate) receive justice. The only reason why any one of us presently believes in Jesus Christ is because God demonstrated his mercy to us by choosing us in Jesus Christ when he would have been perfectly just to leave us in our sins and then punish us for those sins.

We also have discussed the fact that Jesus Christ was chosen by the father to be the mediator of the covenant of grace, a mission which will take him to the depths of humiliation and suffering. If any of Adam’s fallen children are to receive God’s mercy under the terms of the covenant of grace, God’s

justice must be satisfied. Someone must remove the debt we owe under the terms of the covenant of works, as well as the debt we have piled up through our own sinful acts. No removal of debt—no dispensing of mercy. Someone must perfectly obey the demands of the covenant which Adam broke since that covenant still remains in force. God’s love and his justice must not be pitted against each other as though one somehow cancels out the other. No, all of God’s attributes remain in perfect harmony with one another. And all of these attributes are on display in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This is why Article Seventeen, which details God’s promise to Adam to save the fallen race through the seed of the woman, a process which takes place through the covenant of grace, necessary follows our confession’s mention of the doctrine of election. And, as we have seen, the incarnation of our Lord becomes the means through which God does for Adam’s fallen race those things necessary to remove the guilt of sin and breaks its power over the people of God. Jesus Christ must become truly human so that as sin entered the race through one man, so too the race might be saved through human obedience and through human suffering. But since Jesus Christ remains fully God, his sacrifice does what the death of no other man can do—it removes the infinite debt we owe to the holy God.

This, then, is the context in which we must discuss the doing and dying of our Savior so that we don’t repeat the theological errors of the past—speaking of the cross as a ransom to Satan, or as the means by which God shows his love so that we improve our behavior, or as the way in which God demonstrates that he is truly the supreme governor of the universe.¹ We must also keep this context in mind so that we don’t make the mistakes of so many of our contemporaries who tell us that the cross makes us savable (if we meet certain conditions, like faith and repentance) while not actually saving us. Or that the cross is somehow connected to human success and well-being. Jesus Christ did not hang upon the cross to motivate us to new levels of self-sacrifice, to gain our pity, nor to inspire us to do great things. Jesus Christ hung upon the cross to save us from our sins through the satisfaction of God’s justice. If we miss this fact and talk about the cross without the context we have just set forth, we will never understand either the love or the justice of God. The cross will become nothing more than a meaningless piece of jewelry.

In Article Twenty, our confession speaks of the cross of Jesus Christ as the supreme manifestation of the mercy and justice of God, for it is here we see God’s love for sinners, as well as the means by which his justice is satisfied.

Our confession makes three main points. The first is the fact that God sent Jesus Christ as true man, so that he could do for us what we could not do for ourselves. This is the manifestation in human history of God’s eternal decree which flows forth from his mercy and his justice. The second point deals with Christ’s work in satisfying God’s justice through his suffering upon the cross. The third point has to do with the cross as the supreme manifestation of the mercy of God.² While this discussion can sound positively medieval to modern ears, our confession is much closer to the overall thrust of the biblical data than any contemporary discussion of the death of Christ which exalts human goodness and worth and does not consider the gravity of human sin and guilt, nor the nature of the divine transaction taking place.

As to the first point, our confession puts it as follows: “We believe that God—who is perfectly merciful

¹ See the discussions in Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II.563-591; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 384-391.

² Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 158.

and also very just—sent his Son to assume the nature in which the disobedience had been committed, in order to bear in it the punishment of sin by his most bitter passion and death.” If election and reprobation demonstrate God’s mercy and justice in his dealings with his creatures in eternity past, then the cross brings God’s love and justice fully out into the open. It is because God is merciful and just that he sent his Son to earth, to take to himself a true human nature, willingly subject himself to the law of God, and then suffer under the wrath of God, bearing the punishment in his own truly human flesh for the sins which we—not he—have committed.

Much of this opening sentence of the confession is a paraphrase of Romans 8:3, which reads, “*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.*” Since sin entered the race through Adam (the first man), so too a second Adam must come and do what the first Adam failed to do. Not only must Jesus perfectly obey the same commandments Adam did not obey and thereby earn a justifying righteousness for us, but God must punish human sin by punishing someone who was truly human and who can truly suffer. This is the point made by the author of the Hebrews, who states in the 14th verse of chapter 2, “*since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.*”

But as the confession makes plain—and this is what so many of our contemporaries fail to see—Jesus Christ took to himself a human nature and suffered according to the flesh “to assume the nature in which the disobedience had been committed, in order to bear in it the punishment of sin by his most bitter passion and death.” When our confession uses the language of satisfaction (a legal and financial term), what is meant is that someone must make amends for human sin so that God can forgive us.³ Since God is infinitely just and righteous, someone must pay-off the infinite debt we owe to God because of our sin. In fact, there can be no forgiveness without such satisfaction. This is why to even speak of the cross of our Lord, without being clear as to the nature of the transaction which is taking place, is to risk misunderstanding (or even misrepresenting), what Jesus Christ is doing and why.

But the very fact that God would send his only Son to suffer such punishment and experience such a bitter passion and death—especially on behalf of people who do not in any sense whatsoever deserve such mercy—also demonstrates that God is infinitely merciful. To analyze the nature of the transaction is essential to be sure. But to speak of the nature of that transaction and not see the love of God which led to the suffering and dying of the Savior is likewise to misunderstand and even misrepresent what took place. In the cross of Jesus Christ both God’s love and his mercy are wonderfully displayed.

As to the second point made by our confession, the death of Jesus Christ is a satisfaction for our sins, our confession states that, “God therefore manifested His justice against His Son when He laid our iniquity on Him.” The Old Testament backdrop for this is the famous passage from Isaiah 52-53, when Isaiah speaks of the coming redeemer in the most surprising of terms, not that of a great king, but as a suffering servant. Says Isaiah:

Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted. As many were astonished at you—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—so shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut

³ See Richard Muller, Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), s.v. “*Satisfactio*.”

their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand. Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

This wonderful passage not only contains the gospel in the form of a prophecy, it so clearly describes the saving work of Jesus Christ even some seven hundred years before his coming, that some have called Isaiah the fifth evangelist (the author of a fifth gospel)!

These same emphases can be seen throughout the New Testament teaching about the death of Jesus Christ in which a number of categories are used to discuss his death, all of which speak of that death in some sense as a satisfaction of divine justice and a manifestation of God's love. The first of these categories is reconciliation. In Romans 5:10-11, Paul speaks of the cross as an act of reconciliation between two estranged parties. *“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”*

This is another verse we don't often memorize or speak about, for we are not very comfortable with the thought of being God's enemy. A evangelistic tract beginning with the line “God hates you and has a horrible plan for your eternity” probably will not be as successful as the popular tract with which we are so familiar. That being said, the question still remains. We are God's enemies unless and until God's anger toward our sin is turned aside by the death of his Son.

In 2 Corinthians 5:19-21, Paul uses the same terminology, speaking of the cross as the means by which God puts to an end the estrangement between himself and sinners.

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Jesus Christ's death upon the cross does what no religious ceremony can do, what no human work can do, what no amount of human righteousness can do; make peace between the holy God and guilty sinners.

The New Testament also speaks of the death of Christ as a sacrifice which, once offered, turns aside the wrath of God. The apostle Paul speaks this way in Romans 3:25-26, specifically connecting this sacrifice to the justice of God. Jesus. *"whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."* Later in the same epistle, Paul goes on to say: *"he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"* (Romans 8:32).

In 1 John 2:2, John states that the death of Jesus Christ is *"is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world,"* before going on to say later in that same epistle: *"in this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* For the apostle John, it is the fact that Jesus Christ turns aside God's wrath toward sinners—through bearing that wrath in his own body—which demonstrates that God loves us, and that his love for us precedes our love for him. The fact that Christ died for our sins, in our place, or as Jesus states in John's gospel—*"I lay down my life for the sheep"* (John 10:15)—means that the death of Jesus is not only the manifestation of God's love because the cross turns aside God's wrath toward those sinners, it also means that the satisfaction which Christ offers upon the cross is substitutionary in nature. Jesus dies upon the cross for us and in our place, actually (and effectually) turning aside God's wrath toward those for whom he is dying. The death of Jesus Christ is therefore penal (a legal transaction which satisfies God's justice) as well as substitutionary. Christ suffers the wrath of God which I should suffer myself.

This, then, leads to the third point, so that our confession speaks of the mercy of God as follows: "So God made known his justice toward his Son, who was charged with our sin, and he poured out his goodness and mercy on us, who are guilty and worthy of damnation, giving to us his Son to die, by a most perfect love, and raising him to life for our justification, in order that by him we might have immortality and eternal life." There is a reason why we all memorize John 3:16—God did indeed so love the world that he sent his only Son to die for our sins. But let us not overlook the point our confession is trying to make. The reason why God can pour out his goodness and mercy upon us as a demonstration of his love, is precisely because he poured out his wrath upon his son! Yet, while we must understand why Jesus died and what this means (keeping the context for the cross, its penal and substitutionary nature in mind), we must never lose sight of the fact that God did this for us because he loves us. Indeed, it was out of a most perfect love for us, that God gave his one and only Son.

To prove that the death of Jesus Christ does what is was intended to do—satisfy God's justice as well as demonstrate his love for those chosen from before the foundation of the world, so that they might be restored to favor with God—God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. In Romans 4:25, Paul makes this very point: Jesus *"was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."* Jesus died and was raised from the dead, so that we may be justified solely through faith in that one who died and then conquered death and the grave, removing the curse. All of this demonstrates God's love to us, because

God undertakes to satisfy his own justice because he is merciful.

What, then, should we take with us from this discussion of Article Twenty of our confession dealing with the death of our Lord, which will help us live a life of gratitude?

In order to be grateful for what God has done for us and then act accordingly, we must understand what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. There are several things in this regard we need to consider. For one thing, the cross of Jesus Christ is not God's means of making people savable—if they only respond to what God has done through faith and repentance. No, the cross is God's means of actually saving his people. If Jesus Christ dies in the place of sinners, if he reconciles sinners to God, if he redeems those for whom he is dying, if he propitiates God's wrath toward sinners, then these sinners are saved—that is unless there are certain sins for which Christ didn't die. If you are not a universalist and believe in the existence of Hell, then you must limit the atonement, either as to its extent (design) or as to its efficacy (its saving power). This is why we must ask “on what basis are these sinners saved for whom Christ died—faith or the death of Christ?” If you say “faith” then you believe that people are delivered from their sin by something they do—the cross makes people savable. But if you say people are saved by the death of Christ, then you believe the doctrine of particular redemption.

The nature and extent of the atonement is not specifically addressed by our confession. But it is a necessary implication of any discussion of the death of Christ. In 1561, when the Belgic Confession was written, the debate over the extent of the atonement was not yet an issue, but it was by 1619, when the Canons of Dort set forth what has come to known as the doctrine of particular redemption (Christ's death is designed to redeem the elect). But the Belgic Confession does make the point that the death of Christ saves us from the guilt of original sin, as well as the guilt for those sins we have actually committed.

The New Testament never speaks of God making all people who have ever lived “savable” through their acceptance of what Christ does upon the cross. Nor does the New Testament ever teach that God directs his saving grace impersonally to all the people in the world, hoping that people will accept Jesus as their personal savior. Rather, the Bible repeatedly tells us that Jesus accomplished on the cross the very thing necessary for God to save all of those chosen in Christ—the satisfaction of his divine justice, an act which is the demonstration of his most perfect love. Sin must be punished if we are to be forgiven. If Jesus Christ died in the place of every person who has ever lived, if Jesus redeems everyone who has ever lived, if Jesus reconciled everyone who has ever lived back to God, if Jesus propitiates God's wrath toward all sinners who ever lived, then why is it that not everyone is saved? If you say, because they didn't believe or because that they rejected Christ, then you have just limited the atonement. Not its extent, but its saving power. If you do this, you have just established that there are certain sins from which the death of Christ cannot save. But if you assert that God punished Jesus for your sins, then you can be sure that he will never punish you for those sins, since they have already been paid for because Jesus Christ offered a sacrifice to God of infinite value.

No, the cross doesn't make us savable if only we do something in response. The cross actually and effectually saves us from the wrath of God! This is why Paul affirms in Romans 8:30, “*those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*” According to Paul, every one who was chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world, is called and justified when the gospel was proclaimed to us, evidence of which is the response of faith. Thus faith is not the grounds of our salvation—the merits of Jesus Christ are the grounds upon which God justifies us. Faith is a gift from God given to all those for whom Christ died. God has not only ordained the ends (who will be saved), he has also ordained the means by which he will save his

elect (through the preaching of the gospel, which is the proclamation of the message Christ crucified for sinners).

But why is this so important in terms of application and living a life of gratitude? Because we must understand the nature of the transaction upon the cross to understand the cost of our redemption. How can we live a life of gratitude if we think we are saved from God's wrath by something we do? To speak of the cross as a picture of the love of God without at the same time considering that on the cross God's justice is satisfied, makes the words "God is love" absolutely meaningless. How can I be confident that I am forgiven, if Christ dies for countless people he never intended to save and that his death does take away the guilt of certain sins? I cannot. But understanding the mysterious transaction associated with the words, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" must lead to response of faith and repentance, as well as the confession of the truth that God is love. I know God loves me, because Jesus died for me. Knowing that God's justice is satisfied toward all of my sins is that one thing which fills my heart with the desire to obey God's commandments. As an object of the love of God, I am now free to obey.

Here's where the rubber hits the road. Think of the worst sin you have ever committed—that one sin you don't want anyone else to know about. Then think of that habitual sin which holds you in a death grip, that sin you cannot stop committing, and that you have confessed a thousand times and still keep doing. And yes, we all have at least one. Then think about the sum total of all of the sins you have ever committed. What possible chance do you have of making it into heaven if the death of Jesus does not satisfy God's justice toward all of our sins—including the sin of unbelief. It was Jesus himself who said, "with men and woman this is impossible." But Jesus went on to say, with God all things are possible (cf. Luke 18:27). How can we be saved when we can all think of terrible, besetting and constant sins which we have committed? Because Jesus Christ paid for the guilt of all of your sins, in full, once and for all, when he suffered and died upon the cross. Jesus Christ satisfied God's justice toward you. The sinless Jesus died in your place, receiving the punishment you deserve. Jesus Christ redeemed you and purchased you with his own blood. He reconciled you to God and God to you. What is more, Jesus Christ turned aside God's wrath toward you.

Why did God do this? Because, as our confession puts it, out of a most perfect love, have gave his Son. Thus John 3:16 and Romans 3:25 are both worthy of memorization.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." "Whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins."