

“We Know Nothing But Jesus and Him Crucified”

An Exposition on Article Twenty-One of the Belgic Confession

Article 21: The Atonement

We believe that Jesus Christ is a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek¹—made such by an oath—and that he presented himself in our name before his Father, to appease his wrath with full satisfaction² by offering himself on the tree of the cross and pouring out his precious blood for the cleansing of our sins,³ as the prophets had predicted.⁴ For it is written that “the chastisement of our peace” was placed on the Son of God and that “we are healed by his wounds.”⁵ He was “led to death as a lamb”; he was “numbered among sinners”⁶ and condemned as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, though Pilate had declared that he was innocent.⁷ So he paid back what he had not stolen, and he suffered—the “just for the unjust,”⁸ in both his body and his soul⁹—in such a way that when he sensed the horrible punishment required by our sins his sweat became like “big drops of blood falling on the ground.” He cried, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” And he endured all this for the forgiveness of our sins.

Therefore we rightly say with Paul that we “know nothing but Jesus and him crucified”; we consider all things as “dung for the excellence of the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We find all comforts in his wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God than this one and only sacrifice, once made, which renders believers perfect forever.¹⁰ This is also why the angel of God called him Jesus—that is, “Savior”—because he would save his people from their sins.¹¹

¹Ps 110:4; Heb 7:15-17 ²Rom 4:25, 5:8-9, 8:32; Gal 3:13; Col 2:14; Heb 2:9, 17, 9:11-15 ³Acts 2:23; Php 2:8; 1 Tim 1:15; Heb 9:22; 1 Pt 1:18-19; 1 Jn 1:7; Rev 7:14 ⁴Lk 24:25-27; Rom 3:21; 1 Cor 15:3 ⁵1 Pt 2:24 ⁶Mk 15:28 ⁷Jn 18:38 ⁸Rom 5:6 ⁹Ps 22:15 ¹⁰Heb 7:26-28, 9:24-28 ¹¹Lk 1:31; Acts 4:12

We do not go to church to perform a ceremony appease the wrath of the angry God. We do not shed the blood of some poor animal and then consume it in flames as a burnt offering unto God. Nor do we sacrifice a virgin, or throw one of our children into a volcano as a form of human sacrifice. We do not perform some a ritual intended to purify us from our sins and to make God happy with us. Ministers of word and sacrament are not priests, nor do we celebrate the Mass, offering the transubstantiated the body and blood of our Lord as an unbloodied sacrifice unto the Father so that God’s wrath toward our sins is turned away. We do none of these things. Why? Because we have a great high priest who has already turned aside God’s anger toward our sins! Therefore we assemble to hear yet again that Jesus has already, once and for all, satisfied God’s righteous anger toward our sins when he suffered for us upon the cross, because his sacrifice for sin paid our debt in full.

We are working our way through that section of the Belgic Confession which deals with the work of Christ (Articles Twenty and Twenty-One). Before we move ahead to consider Christ’s work as our high priest—who satisfies the justice of God on our behalf—we need to keep in mind the context in which Christ’s priestly work takes place. That context is human sin. If we do not consider the suffering and dying of our Lord in its biblical context—which is human sinfulness—then we really do risk misrepresenting or misunderstanding what Jesus does on our behalf. In the suffering and dying of our

Lord we do not see a picture of human worth, as so many of our contemporaries seem to think. Rather, in the cross, we see the gravity of our sin and the horrible cost that our blessed Lord Jesus paid to redeem us from our sins.

When Jesus Christ suffered and died upon the cross for our sins, we see the perfect embrace of God's mercy and justice. On the one hand, when our Lord suffers and dies in our place, we see God's justice. As Jesus dies upon the cross, he is bearing the wrath of God in his own flesh, turning aside that wrath rightly meant for us as punishment for our own sins. And yet on the other hand, as our Lord suffers for us, we also see God's limitless mercy and love. Jesus Christ suffers and dies on behalf of guilty sinners, men and women who do not deserve to have God's justice satisfied on their behalf. In the cross of Jesus Christ we see the glorious truth so well-captured by John 3:16—"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." In the cross, we also see the satisfaction of God's justice, as Paul puts it in Romans 3:25, "*God put forward [Jesus] 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.*" God's mercy and justice are both on display.

Article Twenty of our confession focuses upon the death of our Lord as the means by which God demonstrates his love for lost and fallen sinners, because he satisfies his justice for all of those chosen in Christ. Article Twenty-One continues the same theme, focusing upon Christ's satisfaction of God's justice, but now doing so by emphasizing Christ's role as the ultimate high priest and mediator between God and humanity, who reconciles the holy God and guilty sinners. It is Jesus the high priest who fulfills all righteousness through his own perfect obedience, who provides an all-sufficient sacrifice which can satisfy the justice of God, and who now intercedes between God and men and women, applying to us even this morning the benefits of his sacrifice upon the cross.

In order to most effectively summarize the biblical teaching regarding the priesthood of our Lord, in Article Twenty-one, our confession makes three main points. First, our confession describes the office of priest and then details how Jesus Christ alone truly fulfills that office. Second, our confession describes the nature of Christ's priestly work on our behalf. In this case, the focus falls upon Christ's work in satisfying the justice of God (that is, God's righteous anger toward each and every infraction of God's law). Third, our confession reminds us of the impact of Christ's priestly work upon our understanding of the Christian life. The priesthood of Christ does not end with his death upon the cross. Rather, our Lord's priesthood continues on in heaven and this has an on-going benefit for us as we strive to live lives of gratitude as we believe and confess these glorious truths to an unbelieving world. This theme is addressed in Article Twenty-Six.

Before we turn to the details of Article Twenty-One, some of you may wonder why our confession speaks only of the priesthood of Christ, when much of the later Reformed tradition, such as the *Westminster Confession* (VIII.1), speak of Christ's work as mediator through his three-fold office, that of prophet, priest, and king. The reason for this is simply a matter of historical development. As one of the earliest of the Reformed confessions, the *Belgic Confession* presents a number of doctrines in seed form which later grow to full flower over time—the *munus triplex*, or the so-called three-fold office of Christ being one such doctrine.¹ At the time Guido DeBres wrote our confession in 1561, there was no real debate about Christ's prophetic office among the Reformed churches, so our confession makes no

¹ See, for examples, discussions of these offices in Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II.391 ff; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 356-366; 406-412.

mention of this office.² Christ's kingly office is briefly mentioned in Article Twenty-Seven which deals with the church—"Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects." So, while our confession does a very thorough job with Christ's priestly office, unfortunately, our confession does not mention Christ's prophetic office, nor fully flesh-out the implication of Christ's kingly office as do Calvin³ and the later Reformed confessions. In fact, after the *Belgic Confession* was written the three-fold office of Christ is one of the most distinctive categories Reformed Christians have used to better understand our Lord's person and work.

With this brief bit of background in mind, how are we to understand the nature of our Lord's priestly office?

Our confession begins by speaking of Christ's work as high priest in the context of the history of redemption. "We believe that Jesus Christ is a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." This, of course, follows the theme set forth back in Article Seventeen, which speaks of God's promise in Genesis 3:15 to save sinners, in that he will send the seed of the woman to crush the head of the serpent. This was the first gospel promise and is fulfilled when Jesus took to himself a true human nature and suffered upon the cross, so that as sin entered the world through a man, so too, through a man, God might redeem all those whom he has chosen to save. When Jesus Christ dies upon the cross, he crushes the serpent's head. Jesus Christ's priesthood is, in this sense, an important part of the fulfillment of God's original promise to sinners. Jesus not only took to himself a true human nature, he also came to do for us what no human priest could do—offer the perfect sacrifice for sin, himself. Indeed, this sacrifice does what the blood of bulls and goats could never do, turn aside God's wrath toward men and women who have sinned against God's divine majesty.

The first sentence of Article Twenty-One is based upon a citation from Psalm 110:4—in which the father says of the coming Messiah—"The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek,'" a verse which is also cited by the author of the Book of Hebrews in chapter 7:15-17, specifically in regards to the coming of Jesus Christ.

This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

When our confession emphasizes that Jesus' priesthood flows from the fact that it was confirmed with an oath, we are brought back to Article Sixteen and the doctrine of election. God chooses to save a vast multitude of Adam's fallen children, showering them with his mercy. God also choose to leave the others in their sin and then punish them for it as a manifestation of his justice. Often described as "the covenant before the covenants," God has also decreed that his Son will be the mediator of the covenant of grace through which God will provide what is necessary to graciously save his people.

In this we are given a hint of an eternal covenant made between the Father and the Son, called the covenant of redemption. This eternal covenant of redemption is the foundation of our salvation from sin

² Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 166.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xv.1.

and underlies all of the promises made under the covenant of grace, which is the outworking of this eternal covenant in human history. As part of this eternal covenant (made before time began), the elect are given by the Father to the Son, who will in turn give himself for them to provide that which is necessary to satisfy the justice of God toward them so that they might be brought to faith and forgiven of their sins. This is what is in view when we read of Jesus receiving this priesthood on the basis of an eternal oath, sworn before time began.⁴

How, then, are we to understand the office of priest and why make the connection between Jesus and the mysterious Melchizedek, rather than say, a more obvious candidate like Aaron? Notice that Jesus does not trace his human ancestry back to the line of Aaron. Instead, our Lord's ancestry comes from the line of David and the tribe of Judah. This is why the Book of Hebrews connects Jesus' priesthood to Melchizedek and not to Aaron.

For one thing, it is important to think in the light of the original covenant of works (and Adam's relationship with God before the fall) and not the later covenant God establishes at Mount Sinai, which sets up the Aaronic priesthood which was temporary and limited to one nation, Israel.⁵ Under the terms of the covenant of works, Adam possessed a royal priesthood (which would have become his eternal possession had he not sinned). This is the same kind of royal priesthood which Jesus possesses from all eternity.⁶ As long as Adam obeyed God's command and was without sin, he was able to make offerings of praise and thanksgiving directly to God, since there was no need to atone for human sin. As the divine image bearer, Adam lived in the presence of God and proclaimed God's promises to all those under his rule. As God's vice-regent over all creation, Adam's dominion over the earth and all of its creatures was the manifestation of his kingly office. Adam's original priesthood, kingship, and prophetic office, reflect Christ's three-fold office as the mediator of the covenant of grace, who, as prophet represents God with us, who as priest, represents us in God's presence, and who as king begins to restore that dominion which God gave to Adam, and which was lost in the fall.⁷

Then, in Genesis 14:8-20, we read of this mysterious figure, Melchizedek, king of Salem, to whom Abram pays a tithe, since even though Melchizedek stands outside the covenant line which will produce the seed of the woman, Melchizedek, like Abram, is a worshipper of YHWH, the true and living God. Therefore, it is quite significant when the author of Hebrews states of our Lord, "*he has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.*" Not only is this a fulfillment of the messianic prophecy of Psalm 110, it clearly indicates that Jesus is not a priest in the order of Aaron. Why is this? Because the Aaronic priesthood foreshadowed the coming of Christ through a series of perpetual animal sacrifices designed to forgive the people of Israel from their sins. Aaron's priestly work is typological, that is, it is designed to point the people of God ahead to the death of Jesus which is the reality from which the Aaronic priesthood is modeled. This is why the sacrifices offered by the priests of Israel must be repeated. Nor do they apply to those outside the Sinaitic covenant. Melchizedek's priesthood is much

⁴ See, for example, the discussion in DeJong, The Church's Witness to the World, II.103-104.

⁵ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 166-167.

⁶ M. G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue, 87

⁷ Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 357.

more like the original priesthood of Adam, which reflected Jesus Christ's eternal priesthood.⁸

Since the priesthood Jesus came to fulfill is neither temporary, nor limited to one nation, as was that of Aaron, the author of Hebrews says of Jesus that he is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Furthermore, unlike Aaron who was himself a sinner, Christ's priestly work renders all of his people priests, as well as prophets and kings—imperfectly in this life, of course, but according to Revelation 1:5, these offices will be perfected in heaven.⁹

This is important on a number of practical levels. For one thing, this helps to explain why the covenant God makes with Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai is not the reality, but only foreshadowed what was to come, that reality which is now ours in Jesus Christ. When Jesus, the great high priest, was born of a woman, lived a life of perfect obedience and then suffered and died upon the cross, the Mosaic economy was rendered obsolete. This is the critical point made by Paul in Galatians 4 and in chapter 7-10 by the author of the Book of Hebrews. Therefore, any animal sacrifices performed after Christ died upon the cross not only do not provide relief from the guilt of sin, they are positively blasphemous. This is why we as Reformed Christians look upon the millennial expectations of the dispensationalists—who teach that after our Lord returns, he will re-institute animal sacrifices during the one thousand years—as a complete reversal of redemptive history. Jesus has already satisfied God's wrath toward our sin through his own sacrifice upon the cross. When Jesus said “it is finished” he means that the debt we owe to God is paid in full.

This is why any human attempt to continue to offer sacrifices to God to turn aside his anger is to say that Christ's sacrifice was not enough. This is why we go to church to hear the gospel and why we do and not perform weird religious rituals or sacrifice animals to appease God's anger. That has already been done. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* states in question 30, “Either Jesus is not a perfect savior, or those who in true faith accept this savior have in him all they need for their salvation.” Jesus Christ has done everything for us which needs to be done. Because he loves us, he came as our high priest and once and for all satisfies God's anger toward our sins.

This is also why we as Protestants must take issue with the Roman Catholic understanding of the priesthood of Jesus, which Rome believes is mediated to God's people through that sacrificial priesthood supposedly given by Christ to the Roman church. Ironically, in order to justify this practice, Rome must appeal to the Aaronic order of priests given to Israel—a priesthood which as we have just seen was temporary and designed to point us to the true priesthood of Jesus Christ, who has already finished his work in satisfying the justice of God. This is why our catechism speaks of the Roman Mass in question 80, as follows:

The Lord's Supper declares to us that all our sins are completely forgiven through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which he himself accomplished on the cross once for all. It also declares to us that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ, who with his true body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father where he wants us to worship him. But the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests. It also teaches that Christ is bodily present under the

⁸ Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 167.

⁹ Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 167.

form of bread and wine where Christ is therefore to be worshiped. Thus the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry.

In large measure, the great divide between Reformed Protestants and Roman Catholics has to do with our understanding of the nature of the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

This brings us to the second point made by our confession, “what does our Lord accomplish in his priestly office?” At this point our confession defines Christ’s priestly work quite extensively, bringing us to the very heart of the gospel.

He presented himself in our name before his Father, to appease his wrath with full satisfaction² by offering himself on the tree of the cross and pouring out his precious blood for the cleansing of our sins, as the prophets had predicted. For it is written that “the chastisement of our peace” was placed on the Son of God and that “we are healed by his wounds.” He was “led to death as a lamb”; he was “numbered among sinners” and condemned as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, though Pilate had declared that he was innocent. So he paid back what he had not stolen, and he suffered—the “just for the unjust,”⁸ in both his body and his soul—in such a way that when he sensed the horrible punishment required by our sins his sweat became like “big drops of blood falling on the ground.” He cried, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” And he endured all this for the forgiveness of our sins.

Before we look at some of the specific things mentioned here, some biblical background about the duties of priests would be useful. According to Hebrews 5:1, a priest’s job is defined as follows: “*For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.*” This must be seen against the backdrop of the function of the priests of Israel, as we see in Leviticus 4:13-21. Verse 20 of that passage reads, “*And the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven.*”

The problem with such a priesthood and such a sacrifice is spelled out in Hebrews 10:11-12, which also contrasts the Aaronic priesthood, with the priesthood of our Lord. “*And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.*”

Our confession mentions a number of things, all of which illustrate what Jesus did for us and why, and how his office of priest far transcends the Aaronic priesthood, which merely pointed to Christ’s. First, Jesus did his priestly work in order to satisfy God’s just anger toward our sins. As we see repeatedly mentioned in Articles Twenty and Twenty-One, the death of Jesus upon the cross is, at its essence, an act which satisfies God’s justice, as Jesus is punished so that we can be forgiven. Forgiveness is not merely God overlooking our sin (as though it did not exist), but God forgives us because Christ satisfies God’s justice, bearing that punishment which should fall upon us.

Second, Jesus did this all for us and in our place. This is what we mean when we speak of the atonement of Christ as substitutionary. Jesus bears in his own truly human flesh that punishment from God which we deserve. Third, our confession speaks of all of this as a fulfillment of numerous Old Testament prophecies, such as Isaiah 52-53, Deuteronomy 21:23 and Psalm 69:4. It was not some quirk of fate which led to our Lord’s death by crucifixion. Jesus might have been hung or disemboweled, both common means the Romans used to put condemned people to death. Jesus might have even been

beheaded, as was Paul by Nero. But no, our Lord was crucified, and hung upon a tree (cross) so that he might become cursed by God (according to an obscure passage in Deuteronomy 21:23), and thereby punished for us and in our place.

Fourth, our confession points out that Jesus broke no law and was perfectly innocent, but Pilate still found him guilty. This was not only a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, it shows the depths of our Lord's humiliation. Here is a sinful Roman governor and representative of a pagan Gentile nation, pronouncing the sentence of death upon the sinless Son of God.¹⁰

Finally, our confession reminds us yet again that our Lord suffered unspeakable physical torment before experiencing the rejection of his father—with whom he had enjoyed unbroken fellowship from all eternity. Jesus' anguish was so great that while praying for us in Gethsemane his sweat looked like drops of blood, anguish which soon culminates in the most mysterious and haunting words in all of the Bible—"my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

After setting out those things which illustrate the nature of Christ's priesthood, things we so easily take for granted, our confession brings us right back to the very heart of our faith as Christians, "he endured all this for the forgiveness of our sins." Jesus' suffering was not accidental, nor was it in vain. It accomplished the very thing God intended it to do—to satisfy his justice.

As to the third point, Article Twenty-One of our confession concludes by setting forth how Christ's priestly work impacts the Christian life and gives us the very thing we need to live a life of gratitude before God, the knowledge that our sins are forgiven.

Our confession describes the impact of Christ's priestly work as follows: "

Therefore we rightly say with Paul that we "know nothing but Jesus and him crucified"; we consider all things as "dung for the excellence of the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." We find all comforts in his wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God than this one and only sacrifice, once made, which renders believers perfect forever.¹⁰ This is also why the angel of God called him Jesus—that is, "Savior"—because he would save his people from their sins

Since the priestly work of Christ satisfies the wrath of God against our sin, our confession directs us to place our focus upon the wonderful benefits of Christ's saving work. Not only are we to know nothing but Christ and him crucified (which is but another way of saying the cross should be at the center of all that we do and think), but we should regard everything else as inferior to such knowledge. While it is easy to take my opening comments about all the things people do to appease an angry God in jest, the fact of the matter is, because of the greatness of Christ's redemptive work, just think for a moment of all of the things people do in an attempt to find peace with God, from which we have been spared. We assemble on the Lord's Day to hear the gospel and receive the sacrament—not to perform some ritual of sacrifice every week which appeases God until next time we gather. Because of this we are directed by our confession to find our comfort in Christ's suffering, for us, and in our place, (which perfects us for all times) and not to look to humanly-devised ways of making peace with God, which, of course, is a reference to the Roman Catholic Mass.

¹⁰ DeJong, The Church's Witness to the World, II.109.

But we will miss out on a great deal if we think that Christ's priestly work came to an end with his death, resurrection and ascension. According to Hebrews 11:2, Jesus took his place at the right hand of his Father, symbolic of the fact that his work in satisfying God's justice is finished. But once he took his place at the father's right hand and is enthroned, he now continually intercedes for his people whenever we sin. This is the point that John is making in 1 John 2:1-2 when the apostle writes, "*my little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*"

While we are correct to focus on what Christ has done for us as our high priest, we cannot forget those things he is doing for us even now. Jesus Christ intercedes for us when we sin. He speaks to the father in our defense. And the one who does so has already shown us how much he loves us when he died for us on the cross.

According to John 17:17, Jesus prays for our sanctification, so that we will grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and live lives (with halting and stumbling steps) which are in ever-greater conformity to the commandments of God. Neither are we left on our own. According to Hebrews 4:14-16,

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Then, our great high priest is completing his work as "*you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 2:5).

This, then, is why we should know nothing but Christ and him crucified, because we know our Lord is in heaven, preparing for us to see his glory (John 17:24). For the great high priest who intercedes for us, never sleeps nor wearies. He never prays without full effect, and he is ever mindful of our continuing struggles with the world, the flesh and the devil (Hebrews 2:18). Jesus Christ is both author and the finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). He does not satisfy God's anger toward us and then abandon us. No one shall ever snatch us from his hand (John 10:28-29), and nothing will ever separate us from his love (Romans 8:37-39). At this very moment, Jesus is at the right hand of his Father where he now intercedes for us. He is there as our advocate and friend (not our judge), praying for us and pleading our case whenever we sin! Since he has been tempted in all the ways that we have been tempted, our great high priest not only knows our weakness, and is there to help us whenever we ask him to do so, but in addition, he has promised us that he will never give us more than we can bear, and that he will always provide a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13).

This is why we must believe and confess that as our high priest, Jesus has indeed satisfied God's righteous anger toward our sin and his priestly work—even now—will always avail on our behalf. Not only should we confess this truth before an unbelieving world, but let each one of us heed the exhortation given us by the apostle that we endeavor to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified! Amen.