

# “There is Only One God”

## Sermon on Article One of the Belgic Confession.

*Texts: Isaiah 44:6-11; I Corinthians 8:4b-6*

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### Article 1 – There is Only One God

We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth<sup>1</sup> that there is only one God,<sup>2</sup> who is a simple and spiritual Being;<sup>3</sup> He is eternal,<sup>4</sup> incomprehensible,<sup>5</sup> invisible,<sup>6</sup> immutable,<sup>7</sup> infinite,<sup>8</sup> almighty,<sup>9</sup> perfectly wise,<sup>10</sup> just,<sup>11</sup> good,<sup>12</sup> and the overflowing fountain of all good.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom 10:10 <sup>2</sup> Dt 6:4; 1 Cor 8:4, 6; 1 Tim 2:5 <sup>3</sup> Jn 4:24 <sup>4</sup> Ps 90:2 <sup>5</sup> Rom 11:33 <sup>6</sup> Col 1:15; 1 Tim 6:16 <sup>7</sup> Jas 1:17 <sup>8</sup> 1 Kgs 8:27; Jer 23:24 <sup>9</sup> Gen 17:1; Mt 19:26; Rev 1:8 <sup>10</sup> Rom 16:27 <sup>11</sup> Rom 3:25-26; Rom 9:14; Rev 16:5, 7 <sup>12</sup> Mt 19:17 <sup>13</sup> Jas 1:17

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When someone says “I think God is like,” you can be certain that this person hasn’t got a clue as to what God is like. Since the only way God can be known is through his self-revelation in creation and his word—our subject for next week—someone who defines God based upon personal experience or personal opinion is engaging in rank idolatry. While it is easy to think of idolatry as something associated with the primitive peoples of the past or pagan religions of the third world, nothing could be further from the truth. We are all habitual idolaters and modern America is a land filled with idols. Therefore, when we believe and confess that there is only one God, we are raising our standard against the spirit of the age.

The confession of the Reformed churches that there is only one God lies at the very heart of all Christian theology. The famous Shema, “*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one*” (Deuteronomy 6:4) is the basic confession of faith of Israel and separates biblical revelation from all forms of paganism. Christians do not worship the “sun god” nor the “moon god” as do the pagans. We worship the God who created the sun and the moon. Nor are we pantheists and identify God with that which he has made, as in “the earth is our mother” creed of the modern environmental movement. There is only one God—not many gods—and since God has created all things, God cannot be equated with that which he has made.

In Romans 1:20-25, the apostle Paul describes the human propensity toward idolatry in terms of a corruption of that knowledge of God we derive from nature. Says Paul,

*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things*

*rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

Thus John Calvin is absolutely right when he speaks of the mind of sinful men and women as an idol factory. Because we our sinful, with great skill and unbelievable ease our minds create alternative “gods” to worship.<sup>1</sup> Idolatry is simply defined as the worship of idols, and an idol is anything we create and worship instead of the true and living God.<sup>2</sup> When someone says, “I think God is like,” the human idol factory has turned out yet another product. Because of human sin, we suppress the knowledge of God with which we are born and which we acquire through our contact with creation, we inevitably exchange the truth for a lie. We invent a “god” who neither confronts us with our sins, nor who condemns our attempts to see our own righteousness and good works as sufficient to gain entrance into heaven. Modern Americans are every bit as prone to this as any of the ancient pagans.

In our culture, idolatry usually doesn’t take the form of man-made objects of worship such as Paul describes in Romans 1, nor do we have countless temples devoted to a local deity as seen in a number of the cities in the world of the New Testament. But make no mistake about—modern Americans are every bit as idolatrous as the pagans we find in the pages of the Old and New Testaments.

The most common idols of American popular culture are celebrity, sex and money, personified in those celebrities or sports figures who live lives of indulgence beyond our imagination. The idol of the middle class is that which Francis Schaeffer once described as, “personal peace and affluency.”<sup>3</sup> And as Neal Gabler has pointed out in his book *Life: The Movie*, often times our idols are fictional characters we see in film and on TV, which we then attempt to emulate.<sup>4</sup> We are so fascinated by such fictional characters that we create our own reality modeled upon these myths and then attempt to place ourselves within that role and act it out in daily life. Inventing our own world and then trying to live in it is every bit as idolatrous as Paul’s description of people creating images of God modeled after created things. For in the imaginary world we conjure forth, we are the creator, redeemer and the object of our own worship. Not only is this a blasphemous affront to our Creator, but we will continually bump into the real world which God has made exposing the foolishness of our vain imaginations! The distance between the situation Paul describes in Romans and that of our own age is really not all that great.

An increasing number of Americans engage in idolatry by embracing the holistic Hindu god who will help you live longer and healthier, such as the impersonal “god” within championed by Deepak Chopra, the religious huckster who regularly appears on Oprah and Larry King. The historic Christian assertion that there is only one God is regularly attacked by PBS regulars Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell, who tell us that Christian theology has its origins in polytheistic myths of the ancient world. The God of biblical revelation (they tell us) has more to do with the situation of the Jewish religious community than with God, who, if he exists at all, is but the projection of human aspirations. Since the Bible doesn’t give us any facts about God (supposedly), but merely contains the record of what the Jews thought about God, we have no foundation upon which to believe and confess our faith. Thus theology (the science of the

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xi.8.

<sup>2</sup> See the helpful discussion of “Idol” and “Idolatry” in *ISBE*.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Schaeffer, “How Should We Live?” in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1982), V.211 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Neal Gabler, *Life: The Movie* (New York: Vantage Press, 2000).

knowledge of God) is really psychology (the study of the human psyche) and God is only what we make him to be. In modern America no religious claim can be considered “factual.” All religious claims are pious opinions, some more misguided than others. This, of course, is nothing other than the creation of a “god” in our own image. And so it is in the midst of such a deplorable and idolatrous situation that we must believe and confess our faith to those around us. There is only one God and it is not you!

**T**he very essence of a confession of faith is that assertion which opens the *Belgic Confession*, “We believe with the heart and confess with the mouth.”

As we saw last time, our fathers in the faith (the Reformers and their children), have taught us that we oppose the unbelieving spirit of the age, not by cursing the world nor hiding in the monastery. Following the pattern given us by Paul in Romans 10:8-10, believing and confessing is the divinely-appointed way to bear witnesses to the world around us of both the law (what God commands) and the gospel (what God freely offers us in the person and work of Jesus Christ). Each one of us must not only truly believe certain things revealed to us by God in his word (what we call “saving faith” which is personal trust in the promises God makes to us as individuals), but as the people of God, we must also confess to those outside the church those very things we corporately believe about God, his revelation, the nature of man, the gravity of sin, the mercy of God shown to sinners in the person of Jesus Christ, the nature of the Christian life, the church and the sacraments. As Reformed Christians we both believe and we confess.

But before we go through the specifics of the faith we confess, a word about our starting point is probably in order. As far as organizing a confession of faith goes, one of the most difficult questions we must face when confessing our faith is “where to begin?” This is the theological equivalent of the ancient philosophical conundrum, “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” Do we begin our task of believing and confessing with an affirmation about God? But since we cannot know anything about God until he reveals himself to us, perhaps we should start with God’s revelation in nature and in the Bible? Or, perhaps it is better that we start where we are—with human nature—and then work back to God? John Calvin addressed this very matter in the opening words of his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he “lives and moves.” . . . . [T]he knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.<sup>5</sup>

So, if we start with God or with ourselves, we’ll end up in the same place. In the *Belgic Confession*, the author (DeBres) chose to begin with God in article one, and then speak of God’s revelation of himself in articles two through seven, before speaking of human nature and the effects of sin in article fourteen. There is good reason for this order.

It is important to keep in mind that a confession of faith is the expression of what the church and its members believe and confess about God to the world around us. As such, our confession of faith assumes the existence of God, it does not seek to prove God’s existence to those outside the church.

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.1.i

God's existence is presupposed by the very act of believing and confessing. While there is a vital role for apologetics (defending the faith) and theological prolegomena—the discipline which establishes the ground of theology (God's existence) and the methods of theology, (the way theologians organize theological systems) the *Belgic Confession* simply begins where the Bible begins in Genesis 1:1—“*in the beginning, God.*” Thus Article One affirms that we believe and confess that there is only one God.

Given the fact that false conceptions of God abound in American culture—the very essence of idolatry, coupled with the fact that Americans chafe at the very thought of being told what to believe—our confession begins with the fundamental affirmation that there is only one God, and that he possesses certain attributes which demonstrate both his transcendence (his otherness and self-existence) and his divine perfections.

Because we believe and confess that God is Triune—a subject we will take up in articles eight and nine—critics of Christianity often accuse Christians of being polytheists. The Koran asserts in Sura 5:72-73:

They do blaspheme who say: ‘Allah is Christ the son of Mary.’ But said Christ: ‘O children of Israel! Worship Allah my Lord and your Lord.’ Whoever joins other gods with Allah, Allah will forbid him the garden and the Fire will be his abode. There will for the wrong-doers be no one to help. They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three [in a Trinity]: for there is no god except One Allah. If they desist not from their word (of blasphemy) verily a grievous penalty will befall the blasphemers among them.

Let us be clear—Allah is not the God of the Bible (who is Triune). Nevertheless, even though we believe and confess the doctrine of the Trinity, we do not believe that there are three Gods. We believe and confess that there is only one God.

In fact, the confession that there is one God lies at the heart of biblical religion. In Isaiah 44:6-8 we read,

*This is what the LORD says- Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come- yes, let him foretell what will come. Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.*

Since there is only one God, the evils of idolatry are immediately apparent.

Thus in verse 9, YHWH declares,

*all who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing? He and his kind will be put to shame; craftsmen are nothing but men. Let them all come together and take their stand; they will be brought down to terror and infamy.*

It is rather amazing that God himself mocks those who create and worship a “god” in their own image. Nothing is more offensive than for a creature to mock his creator by defining him apart from his own

revelation. The gravity of this should be apparent from the first two of the Ten Commandments—

*You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments”* (cf. Exodus 20:2-4).

The teaching that there is one God is found throughout the New Testament as well. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul affirms the same thing as Isaiah—there is only one God, which means that idolatry in any form is great sin. Writes Paul,

*We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many `gods' and many `lords'), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.*

In 1 Timothy 2:5 Paul affirms the same thing: “*For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*”

**H**aving confessed that there is only one God, our confession goes on to set forth a number of divine attributes which separates our doctrine of God from a host of popular and misguided conceptions held by many of our contemporaries who insist upon defining God in their own image.

The first attribute we confess is that God is a simple and spiritual Being. By “simple” we mean that God cannot be divided or conceived of as being who is the sum of his parts—he is not Father, plus Son, plus Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> As we will see in articles eight and nine when we discuss the Trinity, God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By confessing that God is simple we affirm that God is not the sum of his attributes (i.e. holiness plus righteousness plus love plus omnipotence, and so on). Rather God’s attributes are inseparable from his essence.<sup>7</sup>

Thus God is holy, righteous, loving, omnipotent, and so on. Since God is eternal and self-existent, nothing exists before him from which he was made, as is the case with composites. But since men and women are created beings possessing both body and soul, we must be very careful not to conceive of God as the sum of his persons or his attributes.

Nor can we conceive of God as a really “big man,” typical of Greek mythology in which the gods are much like the super-heros we find in comic books and film. The *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England puts it this way:

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite

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<sup>6</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> Richard A Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), s.v. “simplicitas.”

power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost” (Article One).

As for the fact that God is spiritual and therefore immaterial, in John 4:24, the Apostle writes “*God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.*” Thus we confess that God is simple (indivisible) and spiritual (not material).

We also confess that God “is eternal,” that is, he is without beginning nor end. God is above all limits of time and all succession of moments.<sup>8</sup> God was not born, nor will he die. God always was, he is, and he always will be. In Psalm 90:2, the Psalmist declares, “*before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*” In Peter’s second epistle, we read, “*But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.*”

Perhaps a more difficult concept is the idea that God is incomprehensible. This simply means that as finite creatures bound to both time and space, it is very difficult for us to conceive of an eternal being who is not bound, as we are, by the limitations of time and space. We see things from a very limited perspective (the small space we occupy), as well as from that very brief moment of time in which we live. But God knows all things and sees all things because he created all things. He is not bound to the limitations of time or space. Unless he reveals himself to us in a way we can understand, we cannot know anything about him.

In Romans 11:33-36, Paul expresses God’s incomprehensibility not as an item for speculation, but in terms of a doxology.

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! `Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ `Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

When we think about the greatness of God, how can we not be moved to worship him and pour out our hearts in praise?

We also confess that because God is spiritual, he is also “invisible.” As a spiritual being, God does not have a body nor material form, although the Scriptures are replete with theophanies and Christophanes, in which the pre-incarnate Christ appears in a physical form throughout the Old Testament as a witness to God’s mighty acts of redemption. Speaking of the invisibility of God, in Colossians 1:15, Paul puts it this way, “[Jesus] *is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*” In 1 Timothy 6:16, Paul speaks of the God, “*who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen.*” Because God is invisible, comes the prohibition against attempting to depict God in physical form in pictures, images and other such representations—which, of course is idolatry. One thinks of the account of the golden calf in Exodus 32, when the people of Israel attempted to capture God’s likeness by melting down their gold and making statues to help them worship YHWH. Nothing provokes God’s anger anymore than his own people

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<sup>8</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 60.

engaging in idolatry in his name.

We also confess that God is immutable. God is not subject to change as to his person or his purposes. If God were to change as to his person or nature, or revise his eternal decree, this could only be a change for the better or the worse. But how can God increase his perfections or improve his plans? How can God's perfections change for the worse—the every thought of which borders on blasphemy. Indeed, the revelation of God's unspeakable name in Exodus 3:14, "*I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you,'*" expresses his self-existence and his absolute independence from his creation.

God does not watch things play out and then react. He's not like a chess player who is able to anticipate his creature's every move. The Psalmist (102:26-27) speaks of God's immutability using an interesting metaphor. "*They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.*" In Malachi, YHWH states directly, "*I the LORD do not change.*" The apostle James affirms this in the opening chapter of his epistle, when he writes in verse 17, "*every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*" We believe and confess that unlike his creation and his creatures, God does not change.

We also believe and confess that God is infinite. God is perfect in every sense and completely free from all limitations. He possesses absolute perfection in all his attributes without any imperfection or defect. Because he is without beginning or end and transcends all the limits of space, he is omnipresent (everywhere present) simultaneously with all of his perfections. He is infinite in every sense of the word. In 1 Kings 8:27, we read, "*But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!*" In Jeremiah 23:24 YHWH declares, "*Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?*" declares the LORD." In Psalm 139:7-9, David puts it this way: "*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*"

That God is almighty not only follows from things already believed and confessed, but is something God affirms of himself. This is how God identifies himself to Abraham when inaugurating the covenant of grace. In Genesis 17:1, YHWH declares, "*I am God Almighty ; walk before me and be blameless.*" But in Revelation 1:18, Jesus Christ affirms of himself, "*'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'*" That God is almighty is not only an important theological category—that God is omnipotent—but it should also stir our hearts so that we worship the Almighty simply because he is almighty! We do not worship nor serve created things which God has made and which are not almighty, but finite and powerless.

At this point we change gears a bit. Although there is no formal distinction made in our confession between the so-called incommunicable attributes of God and communicable attributes,<sup>9</sup> the former attributes cannot be predicated of any creature. God cannot make another almighty, eternal, immutable, being (human or angel). These are attributes which necessarily belong to God. But the following attributes (the communicable attributes), which God possesses in infinite measure, are attributes also possessed by creatures created in God's image, although we possess them in finite measure.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Berkhof, Systematic Theology, pp. 52-56

Thus we believe and confess that God is perfectly wise. In Psalm 147:5, a verse which demonstrates just how intimately connected the divine perfections are, the Psalmist writes, “*Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit.*” At the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul expresses the same thought in the form of a doxology, (Romans 16:27) “*to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*” Since God has created all things and ordained the ends for which they will be used, God is said to be perfectly wise.

Not only is God perfectly wise he is also perfectly just [righteous] in all his dealings with his creatures. God is not capricious nor fickle. He is not driven by sinful passions as we are, but acts in accord with his perfect holiness (and justice). While this topic is taken up in detail in article twenty, here we affirm that God must punish all sin because he is just, and even though God is also perfectly loving, God’s love and his justice perfectly coalesce and cannot be pitted against each other as though God’s love and grace cause him to set aside his justice. Paul makes this very point in Romans 3:25-26 in regards to the gospel. God is love, so he graciously saves sinners who deserve his wrath. But God cannot save sinners without satisfying his justice. Thus perfect love and perfect justice are seen in the cross of Jesus Christ. Says Paul,

*God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

Furthermore, in Romans 9:14, Paul again speaks of God’s justice, this time in relationship to his sovereign dealing with his creatures, “*What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all!*” And then in Revelation 16:5, those in heaven watching the redemptive drama move to its final stages cannot help but praise God for his just dealings with his creatures.

*Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say: ‘You are just in these judgments, you who are and who were, the Holy One, because you have so judged; for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.’ And I heard the altar respond: ‘Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments.’*

Thus we believe and confess that God is perfectly just, even as the saints in heaven confess the very same thing.

While our confession does not speak of the love of God until article twenty, where God’s love is explicitly mentioned as the ground of the death of Jesus on the cross, at this point we affirm that not only is God just, but that he is also good. A number of those who have written commentaries on the confession believe that God’s love is included under the affirmation that God is good.<sup>10</sup>

But I think it is important that we affirm that God is good (*bon*) as a correlative of the fact that God is just and must punish all sin. Jesus was asked about this thing. In Matthew 19:17, we read, “*‘why do you ask me about what is good?’ Jesus replied. ‘There is only One who is good.’*” Since we are filled with sin and since sin has tainted and stained every part of human nature, only God is truly good in the sense of being beyond the relative and limited goodness we see in God’s creatures. God is not only perfectly

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, p. 23.

just, he is also perfectly good and his goodness and justice do not negate each other.

Finally, as the thought of these divine perfections moved the author of our confession, just as the thought of such things repeatedly moves the apostle Paul to doxology throughout his letters, we read that this one God whom we believe and confess, is the “overflowing fountain of all good.” Echoing the words of Psalm 36:9, “*For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light,*” we believe and confess that all good things come to us from the hand of a good and gracious God, whose love, grace and goodness knows no bounds. In the words of James—words we have already heard this morning—our God is the author of “*every good and perfect gift [which] is from above.*” The image of Revelation 22:1 immediately comes to mind:

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse.*

Here in the heavenly city is the consummate picture of God’s goodness overflowing to the point of removing all effects of human sin.

But let us not forget that this scene of the overflowing fountain of all good described by the angel at the end of the Book of Revelation is a reference to that living water of which Jesus spoke in John 4:14—“*whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*” How do we know that God is the overflowing fount of every good? We look to Jesus Christ, the dispenser of living water. For as Jesus himself puts it, “*he who has seen me, has seen the father*” (John 14:9) And anyone who has seen Jesus in the pages of the New Testament knows that God is the overflowing fountain of all good.

Beloved, with all these things in mind, let us believe with our hearts and confess with our mouths before the unbelieving world and idolatrous culture around us that there “is only one God, who is a simple and spiritual Being; He is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.”