

“Could We Find One Who Loves Us More ?”

A Sermon on Article Twenty-Six of the Belgic Confession.

Texts: Hebrews 4:14-5:10; Jeremiah 17:5-10

Article 26 – Christ’s Intercession

We believe that we have no access to God except through the only Mediator¹ and Advocate Jesus Christ the righteous.² For this purpose He became man, uniting together the divine and human nature, that we men might not be barred from but have access to the divine majesty.³ This Mediator, however, whom the Father has ordained between Himself and us, should not frighten us by His greatness, so that we look for another according to our fancy. There is no creature in heaven or on earth who loves us more than Jesus Christ.⁴ Though He was in the form of God, He emptied Himself, taking the form of man and of a servant for us (Php 2:6-7), and was made like His brethren in every respect (Heb 2:17). If, therefore, we had to look for another intercessor, could we find one who loves us more than He who laid down His life for us, even while we were His enemies (Rom 5:8, 10)? If we had to look for one who has authority and power, who has more than He who is seated at the right hand of the Father⁵ and who has all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18)? Moreover, who will be heard more readily than God’s own well-beloved Son?⁶

Therefore it was pure lack of trust which introduced the custom of dishonoring the saints rather than honoring them, doing what they themselves never did nor required. On the contrary, they constantly rejected such honour according to their duty,⁷ as appears from their writings. Here one ought not to bring in our unworthiness, for it is not a question of offering our prayers on the basis of our own worthiness, but only on the basis of the excellence and worthiness of Jesus Christ,⁸ whose righteousness is ours by faith.⁹

Therefore with good reason, to take away from us this foolish fear or rather distrust, the author of Hebrews says to us that Jesus Christ was “made like His brethren in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted” (Heb 2:17-18). Further, to encourage us more to go to Him, he says: “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 have not 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” (Heb 4:14-15).¹⁰ The same letter says: “Therefore brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb 10:19, 22). Also, “Christ holds His priesthood permanently, because He continues forever. Consequently He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:24-25).¹¹ What more is needed? Christ Himself says: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by Me” (Jn 14:6). Why should we look for another advocate? It has pleased God to give us His Son as our Advocate. Let us then not leave Him for another, or even look for another, without ever finding one. For when God gave Him to us, He knew very well that we were sinners.

In conclusion, according to the command of Christ, we call upon the heavenly Father through Christ our

only Mediator,¹² as we are taught in the Lord's Prayer.¹³ We rest assured that we shall obtain all we ask of the Father in His Name (Jn 16:23).¹⁴

¹ 1 Tim 2:5 ² 1 Jn 2:1 ³ Eph 3:12 ⁴ Mt 11:28; Jn 15:13; Eph 3:19; 1 Jn 4:10 ⁵ Heb 1:3, 8:1 ⁶ Mt 3:17; Jn 11:42; Eph 1:6 ⁷ Acts 10:26, 14:15 ⁸ Jer 17:5, 7; Acts 4:12 ⁹ 1 Cor 1:30 ¹⁰ Jn 10:9; Eph 2:18; Heb 9:24 ¹¹ Rom 8:34 ¹² Heb 13:15 ¹³ Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:2-4 ¹⁴ Jn 14:13

While it is easy to think of our Lord's work as high priest exclusively in terms of what he has already done for us in the past—especially his once-for-all sacrifice for our sins upon the cross—we must be careful not to forget that our Lord's priestly work on our behalf continues on into the present. Jesus' priestly office did not expire like an elected official's term of office when he sat down at the father's right hand after his ascension. Indeed, Jesus remains our high priest even now, and his present intercession for us serves as the basis for both our on-going sanctification as well as our perseverance in the faith. As the mediator of the covenant of grace, Jesus, who is our friend and advocate, constantly intercedes for us with our heavenly father. And his intercession is always with full effect. He will not lose a single person given to him by the father but will raise all of them up on the last day.

Article twenty-six of our confession deals with the on-going priesthood of Jesus Christ. In article twenty-one, our confession carefully summarizes the biblical teaching regarding Christ's priestly office, focusing upon how it is that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament's emphasis upon a perpetual sacrifice for sin, by offering the final sacrifice for sin, namely himself. In article twenty-six our confession now summarizes the biblical teaching to the effect that our Lord's priesthood is an on-going office, that Jesus remains our high priest, and that his priestly work is essential to those of us who live in this present evil age. For without Christ's on-going prayers on our behalf, who among us would make progress in our sanctification? Who among us would persevere to the end our lives in faith? Without our Lord's intercession for us, who of us would not wander away from the fold? Not one.

The length and detail of this particular article of our confession may come as a surprise. Why would Christ's on-going priesthood merit nearly as much discussion as the articles on baptism and the Lord's Supper? The answer is that just as baptism and the Lord's Supper were doctrines which divided Protestants from Roman Catholics at the time our confession was written, so too, does the doctrine of Christ's present priestly office. We must not forget that at the time our confession was written in 1561, Protestants did not have what we have today—a 450 year-old historical identity as Protestants. Virtually all of those who subscribed to the Belgic Confession in the years soon after it was written were recent converts to Reformed Christianity from Roman Catholicism. These people had been raised to believe that the priests of the Roman church were a class of professional clerical “go-betweens” who stood between the Holy God and sinful men and women. The priest functioned as the personal agent through whom God dispensed his grace in the seven sacraments of the Roman church. The priest was the one who represented the faithful before God, hearing their confessions and pronouncing absolution while at the same time prescribing appropriate acts of penance and contrition. This is why the Roman Catholic priesthood lay at the heart of the piety of medieval Christianity.

Once Reformed Christians successfully challenged Rome's notion of religious authority (Scripture alone—versus Scripture and sacred tradition as infallibly interpreted by the church), once they challenged

Rome's understanding of justification (a once and for all declaration made about the sinner who has received the merits of Christ through faith alone—versus a lifelong transformation from sinner into saint), and once it was successfully argued from the New Testament that Christ's priesthood and all sufficient sacrifice for sin does away with the need for an on-going sacrificing priesthood in the church, what then, remains of the office of priest as understood in Roman Catholic terms? Not much.

Thus, our confession must deal with a number of pressing pastoral questions being asked by those leaving the Roman church. How, then, are sinners to relate to God if there is no class of priestly “go-betweens” who gain them access to God? How do we as Christians relate to God apart from human priests and the sacraments they administer? What role do the saints play? Can they intercede for us and provide additional merit to help us get out of purgatory faster? What about the Virgin (who, by the way, is described by the current Pope as a co-redemptrix along with Jesus)? Should we ask Mary to pray for us when we are in need? The answer to all of these questions is to better understand the priestly work of Christ, especially in light of the fact that our Lord's priestly office is on-going. Therefore, all of these things would have been very real issues for those coming to a more biblical understanding of the Christian life.

Given the need to instruct newly-converted Reformed Christians in these matters, especially in the theological vacuum created by the fact that these same Christians were trying to unlearn these very religious traditions with which they were raised (and which were all that they had known), it was essential for the author of our confession to instruct the faithful about the on-going intercession of Jesus Christ, who is our great high priest, and whose on-going priesthood is the very foundation of the Christian life. Under the terms of the covenant of grace, Jesus is the only mediator between God and his people (1 Timothy 2:5). As our ascended savior, Jesus is our advocate before God—that one who, when we do sin, speaks to the father in our defense (1 John 2:1-2). Jesus is that one, who, in his high-priestly prayer, prays not for the world in general, but for all those who have been given to him by the father—the elect (John 17:6-9). As we read in our New Testament lesson this morning, Jesus is that one who has been tempted in all ways as we have, yet is without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He is, therefore, the perfect high priest, who can do far more for us than any earthly priest could ever do.

In order to effectively answer these pastoral questions, our confession makes four primary points about the on-going priesthood of our Lord. The first thing our confession does is to identify the person of the intercessor (Jesus Christ) and define the nature of his intercession (effectual, since he is the God-man). Second, our confession addresses the subject of the access of the intercessor to the throne of God (Christ has ascended on high, taking his true human nature with him). Third, our confession takes up the subject of Christ's sufficiency as intercessor (the one who suffered and was tempted in all ways as we are, and who has given himself for us, is the same one who prays for us). And then finally, our confession addresses the subject of the hope and encouragement we are to derive from the fact that Jesus Christ is our advocate and high priest (when we consider who it is that prays for us, how can we not have hope?).¹

Article twenty-six of our confession begins by taking up the subject of the person of the intercessor before describing the nature of his intercession.

The opening lines of our confession read as follows: “We believe that we have no access to God except through the only Mediator and Advocate Jesus Christ the righteous. For this purpose He became man,

¹ Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, p. 199.

uniting together the divine and human nature, that we men might not be barred from but have access to the divine majesty.” The opening lines of our confession are summaries of familiar verses from Paul—1 Timothy 2:5—“*For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*”—and John—1 John 2:1-2:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

But these words also build upon several statements made back in article twenty-one, especially the assertion that, “we find comfort in His wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means of reconciliation with God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which the believers are perfected for all times.” Not only is our intercessor the mediator of the covenant of grace, as well as our advocate (our heavenly defense attorney) our Lord’s sacrifice for our sins was sufficient to remove once and for all the guilt of our sins. There is no need for earthly priests to offer the transubstantiated bread and wine as an unbloody offering to the father which supposedly turns aside God’s wrath toward us. We have already been perfected through the work of Christ, precisely because he is the high-priest to whom the Old Testament priesthood pointed! Therefore, we are to find comfort in this, because that one who offered himself for our sins is, as we are reminded in article twenty-six, both fully human (and therefore who can empathize with us and be reckoned guilty for our sins) as well as fully divine (so that his sacrifice is completely sufficient to pay the debt which we owe to God).

The two natures of Jesus Christ also factor into his on-going priesthood when we consider the fact that by taking a true human nature to himself, Jesus represents all those given to him by the father, precisely because he is fully human. That one who intercedes for us, is one of us! But since Jesus is also fully God and without sin, he has unlimited access to God having ascended into heaven.

This is why Paul can write in Ephesians 3:12, “*In [Jesus] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*” Because we have such freedom and access unto God based upon the priestly work of Christ, we are no longer in need of a sacrificing priesthood.

The apostle Peter puts it this way in 1 Peter 2:5: “*you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*” Because of Christ’s priestly work on our behalf, each of one of us participates in a holy priesthood (the priesthood of all believers). When we worship and pray, we are bringing spiritual sacrifices which are pleasing to God. But these sacrifices are pleasing to God only because of the on-going priestly work of Christ, and not because we have been able to purge ourselves of all sin (a point made later in this article).

Indeed, apart from this on-going priestly work of Jesus Christ we have no access to heaven. This means that those prayers, no matter how sincere or eloquent, which are not offered to God through the mediation of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, are only so many words. God does not hear these prayers (i.e. attend to them). But any prayer offered through the mediation of Jesus Christ, no matter how pitiful, inarticulate, or tainted by sin, is heard by the Father and answered according to his will, because Jesus Christ’s mediation is that of God himself. Therefore, we need never fear praying or approaching God. For we approach our heavenly father in and through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit when he helps us pray when we know not how to pray (Romans 8:26-27).

Next, our confession takes up the subject of how and on what basis that Jesus makes intercession for us.

With our Lord's incarnation clearly in mind, our confession goes on to state, "this Mediator, however, whom the Father has ordained between Himself and us, should not frighten us by His greatness, so that we look for another according to our fancy. There is no creature in heaven or on earth who loves us more than Jesus Christ." Since Jesus Christ has been chosen by the father to be the mediator of the covenant of grace, we have no business looking for any mediator other than that one God has chosen.

While we as sinners may fear approaching the holy God, consider the biblical testimony regarding the character of the mediator whom God has chosen. Matthew records Jesus as saying, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (11:28). In John's gospel, Jesus declares that "greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends," something Jesus went on to do for all of us.

Quoting from Isaiah's gospel, Jesus says of himself, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Matthew 12:20). When speaking of prayer Jesus says,

which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:9-11).

In his first epistle, John goes on to tell us, "this is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Even though Jesus is fully God and without sin, in his office as mediator he hears our prayers, intercedes for us with the father in the power of the Holy Spirit, who answers us according to his sovereign will. Never forget, that God is always mindful of our need and is merciful beyond measure.

And how is this possible? As our confession goes on to say of the mediator, "though He was in the form of God, He emptied Himself, taking the form of man and of a servant for us (Philippians 2:6-7), and was made like His brethren in every respect (Hebrews 2:17)." Our mediator is as fully human as we are, and not only knows our weakness, he alone exercises the very compassion of God himself. This is why our confession asserts, "if, therefore, we had to look for another intercessor, could we find one who loves us more than He who laid down His life for us, even while we were His enemies (Romans 5:8, 10)?" The answer should now be obvious—absolutely no one is able to do what Jesus can do nor love us as only he can! In fact, "if we had to look for one who has authority and power, who has more than He who is seated at the right hand of the Father and who has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18)? Moreover, who will be heard more readily than God's own well-beloved Son?"

This is the point made by the author of Hebrews in Hebrews 1:3:

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

That one who is filled with compassion for us—having been made like us in all things, yet without sin—is also the creator and sustainer of all things.

Perhaps it is helpful to think of it like this—that one who has compassion upon us, also has the power and the authority to act on our behalf. This is the application set forth in question and answer 26 of our catechism which deals with our confession of God as “our father.” In the answer which defines what this means, we read,

I trust him so much that I do not doubt he will provide whatever I need for body and soul. He will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this sad world. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.

The proof that God is both loving and all-powerful, can be seen in the identity of the mediator whom God has chosen and sent. Jesus Christ, who will not break the bruised reed, now sits at the right hand of father in heavenly majesty, having removed the guilt of our sins once and for all. He is our high priest.

Our confession now takes up the subject of Christ’s unique sufficiency as intercessor.

If all that we have seen so far is true, this explains why Protestants so vehemently reject the Roman Catholic doctrine of the invocation of saints, or the virgin. There is no one other than the God-man who can make suitable intercession for us, and the degree to which we think otherwise is the degree to which we undermine the sufficiency of the work of Christ. Accordingly, we read in our confession the following condemnation of Rome’s position on this: “Therefore it was pure lack of trust which introduced the custom of dishonoring the saints rather than honoring them, doing what they themselves never did nor required. On the contrary, they constantly rejected such honour according to their duty, as appears from their writings.”

In Jeremiah 17:5-10, we are reminded of the folly of placing our trust for eternal things in men and women, who will always fail us.

This is what the LORD says: `Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. `But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

Why is this true? As Jeremiah goes on to say, “*the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? `I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.*” This is why it is so foolish to invoke the saints, who, no matter how pious, were sinners just as we are.

In fact, the apostles repeatedly warned against placing our trust in them, rather than in God who called them and empowered them by the Holy Spirit. In Acts 10, we read of how, when Peter entered Cornelius’ house, Cornelius fell at Peter’s feet in reverence. But Peter would have none of it. In verse 26, we read “*But Peter made [Cornelius] get up. `Stand up,’ he said, `I am only a man myself.*” Much the same thing is recounted in Acts 14, after Paul and Barnabbas were in the city of Lystra and healed a man who had been crippled from birth. Thinking that Paul and Barnabbas were gods (Zeus and Hermes), in verse 15, Paul sternly rebuked them,

‘Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them.’

If the apostles would not receive worship on earth—even in their handling of holy things and miraculous power—what makes us think things have changed now that they have been taken to heaven and are now in the presence of Jesus, the high-priest *par excellence*? Therefore to worship the saints, to seek their prayers, or trust in their merits, as taught by Rome, is not only an offence to Christ, but an offence to the saints themselves.

Given all that Jesus Christ has done for us and indeed continues to do for us in his priestly office, what encouragement can we draw from this knowledge that our Lord who died for us now intercedes for us?

Our confession speaks of this encouragement as follows, beginning with the fact that we can pray with great confidence, since we can count on the same merits of Jesus Christ which justify us, to ensure that our prayers are heard when we offer them to God. “Here one ought not to bring in our unworthiness, for it is not a question of offering our prayers on the basis of our own worthiness, but only on the basis of the excellence and worthiness of Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is ours by faith.” What a wonderful thought—to know that our unworthiness is no longer an issue. This is where the doctrine of justification (and understanding it properly) not only lays the foundation upon which we can do good works (not to be justified, but because we are justified), but also for a life of prayer, which is, as Calvin often puts it, “the chief exercise of faith.” Since justified sinners are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, not only are our feeble attempts at good works pleasing to God, so too are our feeble prayers. For a Christian, prayer is never a matter of our worthiness, but of the worthiness of our mediator.

In 1 Corinthians 1:30, Paul reminds us “we [are] *in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.*” How can God turn us away? Indeed, if we believe and confession the truth of Acts 4:12, “*salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved,*” we can be assured that God hears all those prayers addressed to him in the name of his son.

With this point firmly established—Christ’s righteousness and personal and on-going intercession is the basis of our prayers, our confession goes on to quote a number of passages from the Book of Hebrews, “therefore with good reason, to take away from us this foolish fear or rather distrust, the author of Hebrews says to us that Jesus Christ was ‘made like His brethren in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted’ (Hebrews 2:17-18). Further, to encourage us more to go to Him, he says: ‘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 have not 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’ (Hebrews 4:14-15—part of our New Testament lesson). The same letter says: ‘Therefore brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith’ (Hebrews 10:19, 22). Also, ‘Christ holds His priesthood permanently, because He continues forever. Consequently He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them’ (Heb 7:24-25).”

Indeed, in Jesus Christ we have the perfect mediator and advocate. Why would we ever need the intercession of the saints or the virgin? Why should we be fearful of God or think of prayer as just another religious duty. The one who prays for us knows our thoughts before they enter our mind, and yet, knowing our thoughts, loves us anyway. That is the basis for frequent and fervent prayer.

Having summarized a number of passages from the Book of Hebrews, our confession now cites several texts from the gospels, after asking one more time the salient question all Protestants should ask of those Roman Catholics who think the intercession of Jesus is not enough. “What more is needed?” Our confession answers this question by reminding us that, “Christ Himself says: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by Me’ (John 14:6). Why should we look for another advocate? It has pleased God to give us His Son as our Advocate. Let us then not leave Him for another, or even look for another, without ever finding one. For when God gave Him to us, He knew very well that we were sinners.” Again, what a wonderful and comforting thought.

“In conclusion,” our confession simply points out that “according to the command of Christ, we call upon the heavenly Father through Christ our only Mediator, as we are taught in the Lord’s Prayer” [which, by the way, is the pattern for all Christian prayer]. Therefore, “we rest assured that we shall obtain all we ask of the Father in His Name (John 16:23).”

Given all that the Bible teaches regarding the on-going priestly work of Christ (and we could do the same with his on-going prophetic and kingly offices as well), what should we take with us as we consider this subject?

Having discussed faith, justification, and sanctification in articles twenty-two through twenty-four, and then having made the case in article twenty-five that while the substance of the law remains while the ceremonies and shadows have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the author of our confession has now come to the place to set forth the fact that the present intercession of Jesus Christ is the foundation for the Christian life. If the chief exercise of faith is prayer, DeBres must instruct fledgling Protestants that they need not the intercession nor help of saints, or even of the virgin when they pray. In Jesus Christ, they have all that they need. Just as we have all we need. They need not a class of professional go-betweens, since Jesus (the God-man) now sits at the right hand of the father and intercedes for all his people. And Jesus still sits at the father’s right hand, even now. Hence, I am not a priest but a minister.

It is helpful to be reminded that it was Jesus who prayed during his high priestly prayer, when he prays for all those given him by the father (John 17:6), “*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*” Thus Christ’s priestly work on our behalf ensures that all those whom he justifies, he will also sanctify. And lest you think that Jesus leaves us on our own once we come to faith, in Luke 22:32, Jesus says to Peter, “*I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.*” Because Jesus Christ is our high priest, we will be sanctified and he will ensure that we persevere to the end of our lives trusting in him. Paraphrasing our catechism—he desires to do this, because having been tempted in all ways as we have, and knowing our weakness, he is compassionate. Yet, he is without sin, and as the God-man, he alone has the power to answer us when we pray according to his will. And besides, where on earth (or even in heaven for that matter) could we ever find one who loves us more than the Lord Jesus? Amen.