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Article 20

The Justice and Mercy of God in Christ

The perfect unity of God's justice and mercy according to Scripture

1. In Articles 18 and 19 we confessed how God fulfilled his promise of redemption by sending his Son, who became God and man in *one* Person, having taken upon himself our human nature. By doing so, God revealed the unity of his justice and mercy, as we confess in Article 20. We have already seen this unity in the context of God's plan of salvation in Article 16. Article 20 addresses the *realization* of this plan for which Christ was needed, because of the unity of God's justice and mercy.

a. It is important to emphasize this harmony between God's mercy and justice, for people often contrast these attributes of God. This usually happens when people do not want to accept that God executes his justice in his wrath and in punishing sin. Rather, they appeal to Scripture: "God is love." (1 John 4:16) In doing so, they take these words out of context and change the truth into a lie.

Already long ago it was stated that justice and grace, satisfaction and forgiveness, are opposites. This was the opinion of the Socinians in the time of John Calvin and Guido de Brès. [The Socinians were followers of Socinus, who denied the deity and sacrifice of Christ. They later became known as Unitarians.] Nineteenth-century modernism has taken over this idea.

Even today this school of thought is blatantly propagated by theologians. They claim that the confession of God's justice in punishing sin is clearly a medieval feudalistic corruption of the gospel, smuggled into western theology by Anselm of Canterbury. [Anselm was among the greatest of the medieval scholastics, and taught that Christ was able to offer to God the satisfaction owed by the

human race.] He saw God as a great nobleman who demands his right. Yet these theologians claim that this is more a picture of the gods than of God. They teach that God does not demand his right. Rather, the Bible speaks of God's *grace*. They draw a sharp contrast between God's justice and mercy.¹

It is clear, however, that if God, as the righteous and holy One, does not have the *right* to punish, neither can he show *mercy*. Then God simply puts up with sin and unrighteousness. In that case, we could not even speak of a demand for justice, and even sin would be of no consequence. Every man would be allowed to do what is right in his own eyes. This concept opens the way for lawlessness and breaks down the wall that holds it back.

b. The position of the Hutterites [followers of Jakob Hutter] is diametrically opposite to this. According to them it is Jesus Christ who moved God to love us, by satisfying the demand of his justice and stilling his wrath over our sins. So they too believe there is a contrast between God's justice and mercy. Christ does not take away this contrast but bridges it. Therefore Jesus and his love is more central than the triune God in their adoration, preaching, worship and song. The Hutterites often express this 'Jesus worship' in a sentimental way, losing themselves in a mystical beholding of Jesus' wounds.

2. Nowhere in the Bible is there a contrast between God's justice and mercy. On the contrary, God's mercy is interwoven with his justice. When the Bible speaks of God's justice, it is not a judicial concept or a legal act, as we know them. In the *Septuagint*, the oldest Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for justice is sometimes even translated by *mercy*, and vice versa. When God executes his justice, he works salvation at the same time. That is why Israel continually appealed to God's justice when they entreated the LORD to save them from their distress (Psalm 5:8; 31:1; 35:23-24). Their redemption made them sing of the LORD's justice (Judges 5:11; Psalm 9:8-11; 35:28). His acts of redemption are called "righteous acts" (1 Samuel 12:7). "Zion will be *redeemed* with justice" (Isaiah 1:27). In the Bible, God's justice is first of all his faithfulness to his covenant promises (Deuteronomy 32:4). Therefore there is evidence of God's justice through deliverance from enemies and punishment of the wicked, but also through forgiveness of sins (Psalm 51:14; 143:1, 2; Isaiah 1:18).

¹ Drs. Boelens in *proeve van belijden*. Cf. *Believe and Confess*, vol. I, c. 21, First Section, 1.

Philippians 1:21-23; Luke 23:43). He who believes has passed from death to life, and that life is eternal life (John 5:24). He who believes in Christ, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in Christ shall never die (John 11:25-26). Death has lost its power over the believer. So, in principle, we receive the gift of immortality already now, just as we have eternal life now (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 58).

For discussion:

1. If Christ perfectly satisfied justice by suffering the punishment for our sins, how do we explain that, in this life, also the believers are still “punished” for their sins (Hebrews 12:4-11; 1 Peter 1:6-7)?
2. Some people believe that Christ did not leave the grave with the same body with which he was laid in it, or that Christ only rose in the hearts of his disciples, as they sensed it. There are also other variations of modern theology. Why is it so serious to deny the facts of Christ’s resurrection?
3. Can we say that humans have immortal souls?
4. Regarding believers who have died, can we only say that they are dead until Christ returns? ²
5. Why may we, also when we grow older, always have the comforting perspective that life in faith is eternal life?
6. How is Psalm 119 a song of life?

² B. Telder in his *Sterven, en dan ...?*