

**Part Six:**  
**Reformed Confessions**

## The Earliest Report on the Author of the Belgic Confession (1561)

The Belgic Confession, which was published in 1561 and first surfaced in Doornik, in the southern part of The Netherlands, appeared anonymously. The title page informed the reader that the Confession had been made with common accord by the believers in The Netherlands. This cannot be taken to mean that all Reformed Dutch people were involved in the making of the Belgic Confession. The title is derived from the Gallican Confession and refers to the general agreement to the doctrine of the Confession rather than to the actual making of the Confession. The title page does not provide any information on the author.

Information concerning the author began to become public in the seventeenth century, fifty years after its first appearance. This began with a letter Saravia wrote to Uytenbogaert in 1612. His information was repeated in different forms by Thysius (1615), Uytenbogaert (1647), Trigland (1649), and Schoock (1650).<sup>1</sup> The author was identified as Guido de Brès, together with some helpers (according to the Remonstrants) or many helpers (according to the Reformed). This information was used as an important argument in the seventeenth-century discussion on the Belgic Confession, which concentrated on its authority.

It took almost three hundred years before a sixteenth-century annotation on the authorship of the Belgic Confession became known. When

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<sup>1</sup> See for their statements, J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, ed., *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976) 8–9.

J. A. van Langeraad did research for his doctoral dissertation on Guido de Brès, he found a handwritten note in a book published in 1762:

Thomas van Tielt wrote to Arnoldus Cornelii, minister at Delft, from Antwerp, July 17, 1582: I have spoken with Taffinus about the confession, which he says was made by Guy de Brès.<sup>2</sup>

This quotation has since been used as the basis for the discussion on the author of the Belgic Confession. It brought to an end the debate on the number of people involved in the making of the Confession, and it clinched Guido de Brès' position as the author. The certainty with which the question of the authorship is decided today in favour of Guido de Brès is the direct result of the discovery of this statement. That is remarkable, considering the fact that it was written more than two hundred years after the publication of the Confession. This important quotation deserves a closer investigation. Where does it come from, and can its content be trusted?

### The Origin of the Quotation

Before investigating the content of the quotation, we should know more about its provenance. It was discovered in a copy of W. te Water's study on the Belgic Confession, published on the occasion of its bicentenary.<sup>3</sup> This copy can be found in the library of Leiden University. It is an unusual copy, for it is interleaved with blank pages. On page 7 of his book, Te Water concluded that Guido de Brès is the author of the Confession on the basis of an extensive quotation taken from a book by Prof. M. Schoock, published in 1651. The handwritten statement can be found on the blank page opposite page 7. This unidentified annotation obviously intended to support the general opinion on the author of the Belgic Confession with the much older statement of Thomas van Tielt.

The question arises as to who wrote this statement in W. te Water's book. Investigation in the library showed that this was not the only inter-

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<sup>2</sup> L. A. van Langeraad, *Guido de Bray* (Zierikzee: S. Ochtman & Zoon, 1884) 117; see also Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> W. te Water, *Tweede eeuw-getyde van de geloofsbejdenisse* (Middelburg: P. Gillissen, 1762). At the time, the two 1561 editions of the Belgic Confession had not yet been rediscovered. Te Water thought the confession had first been published in 1562; see pp. XI, 4. He did not take into account the early information he provided himself, that the *Corpus et syntagma confessionum fidei* dates the confession from 1561; see p. VII.

leaved copy of Te Water's book owned by the library. Two such copies are present, and they have successive numbers in the library catalogue, ending with 12 and 13, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

The original owner of #13 can be detected rather easily. On the inside of the cover a note is written, stating: "The letter of H. van Wijn to W. te Water (autograph, September 14, 1793) is now included among the manuscripts," followed by its specific location. From the fact that the book contained a letter written to W. te Water it can be derived that he was the original owner of the book. In other words, this is the author's own copy. This is confirmed by another handwritten note, stating: "My son Jona E. te Water notes in the Diary of his travels in Holland and Western Frisia the following concerning this work." This is followed by several laudatory remarks. This note was obviously written by the author, W. te Water, after having read his son's diary of a trip through the country.<sup>5</sup>

The original owner of the other interleaved copy of W. te Water's study on the Belgic Confession, #12, cannot be so easily identified. Opposite the title page, a note is written referring to an article published in July, 1789 concerning the Belgic Confession. The note ends with the statement: "In this report, some details are mentioned which can be used for clarification or confirmation of this work." This note cannot be from the hand of the author, for it refers to an article on the Belgic Confession published in 1789, twenty-five years after Willem te Water's death.

This second copy of W. te Water's book on the Belgic Confession was probably owned by his son, Jona Willem. Two arguments can be brought forward in support of this. It is understandable that the author would have an interleaved copy of his own book in order to make additional remarks. It would be very unusual for someone else to have such a copy unless he was interested in the area himself and could use space for making additional annotations. Jona Willem te Water qualifies, for he was interested in church his-

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<sup>4</sup> I thank my long-time friend, Drs. J. M. de Jong, who went to Leiden at my request to study the original source for the quotation. He discovered that two interleaved copies are included in this collection and provided me with the first-hand information on these books used in this article.

<sup>5</sup> See the article of D. Nauta on W. te Water in *Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlandse protestantisme* (6 vols.; ed. D. Nauta et al.; Kampen: Kok, 1978–2006) 3.391–392 [hereafter *BLGNP*]. W. te Water lived from 1698 to 1764. The names of three sons of te Water are mentioned: Jan te Water, Jona Willem te Water and Willem te Water. The name Jona E. te Water, mentioned in the text, may be the result of a misspelling.

tory. While a minister, he finished the study of the reformation in Zeeland which his father had worked on but which he was prevented by death from finishing. Later, he became a teacher in philosophy and national history at a seminary in Middelburg, and afterwards professor in church history at the university of Leiden.<sup>6</sup> It would be understandable for the father to have another interleaved copy made for his son who specialized in the same area.

The other indication that Jona Willem was the original owner is the fact that both copies of his father's book on the Belgic Confession came out of his library. The journal of the library of the university of Leiden for the year 1823 mentions that the "Bibliotheca te Waterana" was donated to the library. Jona Willem had died the previous year, and all his books went to the library of the university where he had been teaching.<sup>7</sup> He owned the two interleaved copies of his father's book that were included in the university library under successive numbers.

The note on the authorship of the Belgic Confession can be found in the copy originally owned by the father, Willem te Water. The handwriting, however, is different from the father and similar to that of the son. We may conclude that the respected historian Jona Willem te Water somewhere found the statement attributing the Belgic Confession to Guido de Brès. He was not only a church historian; he was well-versed in the history of the sixteenth century. He studied extensively the history of the covenant of the noblemen of 1566, publishing the results in several volumes, and he was involved in the publication of church documents.<sup>8</sup> Jona Willem te Water had both the opportunity to write this note and the knowledge of the period. All of this gives credibility to the handwritten note.

### The Content of the Quotation

The written statement itself, too, requires careful attention. It consists of an introduction, followed by the quotation itself. Actually, the text found in Te Water's book is longer than that quoted by Van Langeraad. It says:

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<sup>6</sup> Jona Willem te Water lived from 1740–1822; see on him R. A. Flinterman's article in *BLGNP*, 2.454–456.

<sup>7</sup> The library of Leiden University also owns a catalogue of the Te Water collection, listing prices for the books. It is unclear what exactly happened. It is possible that the original plan was to sell the books, but that the heirs decided to donate them to the university. It is also possible that the library bought the entire collection or that someone donated them to the university library.

<sup>8</sup> See R. A. Flinterman, "Jona Willem te Water" in *BLGNP*, 2.456.

Thomas van Tielt wrote to Arnoldus Corneli, minister at Delft, from Antwerp, July 17, 1582: I have spoken with Taffinus about the Confession, which he says was made by Guy de Brès and presented in French to his Majesty.<sup>9</sup>

This statement not only speaks of Guido de Brès' authorship, it also mentions the presentation of the Confession to the king.

The original text of the quotation shows two different forms of Dutch. The introductory sentence on Thomas van Tielt is written in old-fashioned Dutch, but the quoted sentence is written in an altogether different Dutch. The first sentence could have been written in this form by Jona Willem te Water, but the quoted sentence looks much older.

The content needs to be investigated to find out whether it is a trustworthy report. Three ministers are mentioned: Arent Cornelisz, Thomas van Tielt, and Jean Taffin. Who were they, and how were they connected? In general, it can be said that they knew each other well. They had cooperated in the same classis Dordrecht for a number of years. To give an example, on June 16, 1576, they were part of a committee to hear the confession of a Bartholdus Wilhelmi.<sup>10</sup>

It is understandable that Arent Cornelisz, who received the letter, would not have firsthand knowledge of the early years of the Belgic Confession. He was born in Delft, a city in the northern provinces of The Netherlands, in 1547. After having studied in Heidelberg and Geneva, he served as a minister at a church of Dutch refugees in Frankenthal from 1571–1573 and then became minister in Delft. He stayed there until his death in 1605.<sup>11</sup> He

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<sup>9</sup> The note in Te Water's book reads: "Thomas van Tielt schreef aan den Delftschen Pred[kant] Arnoldus Corneli uit Antwerpen 17 July 1582: 'Ic hebbe Taffinum gesproken van de Confessie, de welcke hij seyt van Guij de Brès gestelt te sijne ende in Walsch aen sijne M[a]jesteit] gepresenteert te sijne.'"

<sup>10</sup> See J. P. van Dooren, ed., *Classicale Acta 1573–1620*; vol. 1: *Classis Dordrecht 1573–1600* (s Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1980) 45.

<sup>11</sup> See on Arent Cornelisz the articles by H. Kaajan in *Christelijke encyclopaedie* (6 vols.; ed. F. W. Grosheide et al.; Kampen: Kok, 1931) 6.132f; the extensive article "Kroeze of Croesius" in *Biographisch woordenboek van protestantsche godgeleerde in Nederland* (s Gravenhage: Nijhof, 1943) 264–270; W. Nijenhuis, "Cornelisz, Arent" in *BLGNP*, 4.104–107; H. J. Jaanus, *Hervormd Delft ten tijde van Arent Cornelisz* (Amsterdam: Nordemann, 1950); and P. H. A. M. Abels and A. Ph. F. Wouters, *Nieuw en ongezien. Kerk en samenleving in de classis Delft en Delfland 1572–1621* (2 vols.; Werken van de Vereniging voor Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis; Delft: Eburon, 1994) index s.v.

would not have known who the original author of the Belgic Confession was, for he had always lived in a different part of the country.

At the same time, Arent Cornelisz had a special interest in the Confession. The Dutch text of the Belgic Confession had not kept pace with the French text. The French edition had been revised in 1566, but this version had not yet been translated into Dutch. The Dutch churches were aware of this, for at the provincial Synod of Dordrecht (1574) the question had been asked whether the Belgic Confession should not be examined and made to conform to the French edition of Beza.<sup>12</sup> Synod Middelburg (1581) had acted on this and charged Rev. Daniel de Dieu to translate the Belgic Confession (“the articles presented by the Dutch churches to King Philip”) from French into Dutch.<sup>13</sup> When De Dieu could not find the opportunity to do this, Arent Cornelisz took over at the urgent request by Hendrik van den Corput. He finished the translation in time for the regional Synod of 1583 to deal with it.<sup>14</sup> It is understandable that Arent Cornelisz would be interested in receiving information about the author of the Belgic Confession.

Who was Thomas van Tielt, who provided the information about the author of the Belgic Confession to Arent Cornelisz? He was born in 1534, in Mechelen, in Belgium. He entered a monastery in Antwerp, and after having left it temporarily to do pastoral work at Oudenbosch, he returned to the monastery to become abbot. In 1566, he joined the Reformation and provided hospitality to William of Orange and other nobility. He had to flee the city in 1567. After having studied in Heidelberg and Geneva, he served several congregations outside The Netherlands. In 1575, he became minister of the Reformed church at Delft, and he had been appointed court preacher of Prince William of Orange in 1573. When the Prince moved his court to Antwerp, Thomas van Tielt, too, moved to Antwerp, where he stayed from 1579 until the surrender of Antwerp in 1585.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> F. L. Rutgers, *Acta van de Nederlandsche synoden der zestiende eeuw* (1899; repr., Dordrecht: van den Tol, 1980) 212.

<sup>13</sup> Rutgers, *Acta*, 443, see also 372.

<sup>14</sup> See J. Reitsma and S. D. van Veen, *Acta der provinciale en particuliere Synoden* (8 vols.; Groningen, J. B. Wolters, 1892–1899) 2.258; and on the earlier history, H. H. Kuyper, *De Post Acta of nahandelingen van de nationale Synode van Dordrecht* (Amsterdam: Hoveker and Wormser, n.d.) 350.

<sup>15</sup> See on Van Tielt, the articles by G. P. van Itterzon in *Christelijke encyclopedie* (6 vols.; 2nd ed.; Kampen: Kok, 1961) 6.363; and by A. Ph. F. Wouters in *BLGNP*, 5.503.

Thomas van Tiel originally came from the southern, Francophone part of The Netherlands, but he only joined the Reformation five years after the Confession had been published. In 1582, when he wrote in his letter that Guido de Brès was the author of the Confession, he had just recently heard who the author of the Belgic Confession was. He supposed that Arent Cornelisz, too, would not know this. All this indicates that not only the Roman Catholic leaders, to which van Tiel had belonged when the Confession was published, but also the Reformed leaders such as Arent Cornelisz, did not have clear information concerning the author of the Confession.

According to the quotation, Jean Taffin is the source of the information that Guido de Brès had written the Belgic Confession. He was a member of an influential family in Doornik, the city where Guido de Brès had ministered to the Reformed congregation and where the Belgic Confession was initially discovered. Jean Taffin was born at the end of 1529 or the beginning of 1530 and died in 1602.<sup>16</sup> After having studied in Leuven, he travelled to Italy for further study. On his return to Belgium, Taffin settled in Antwerp and joined the Reformed congregation there. When the congregation was dispersed as the result of persecution, he went to Strasbourg in 1558, and from there to Geneva. Although his name does not occur among the names of the students enrolled at the Academy, it is assumed that he studied theology there. In May 1561, he became a minister of the Reformed congregation in Metz and he stayed there till 1569.<sup>17</sup>

It cannot be proven that Jean Taffin was in Doornik in the crucial year 1561, when the Belgic Confession was published. That would not have prevented him from knowing about the origin of the Belgic Confession, for his family still lived in Doornik, and they were staunch supporters of Guido de Brès.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, he may have heard directly from Guido de Brès that he had authored the Confession. In any case, Guido de Brès did mention in a letter dating from 1565, that he had met Taffin who had proposed that they together promote freedom for spreading the Reformed doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

That leaves the question of whether Thomas van Tiel could have met

<sup>16</sup> S. van der Linde wrote a brief biographical article about Taffin in *Christelijke encyclopedie*, 6.320. He later published a biography, *Yean Taffin* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1982), in which he not only gave more material, but also implicitly corrected his previously published article. See for the dates, *Yean Taffin*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Van der Linde, *Yean Taffin*, 33–36.

<sup>18</sup> G. Moreau, *Histoire du Protestantisme à Tournai jusqu'à la veille de la Revolution des Pays-Bas* (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1962) 345–347.

<sup>19</sup> See for this letter, Van Langeraad, *Guido de Bray*, 58, and Appendix A, VI.



Taffin around July of 1582, as the quotation indicates. A collection of letters written by Taffin provides the answer. In 1582, he wrote several letters from Antwerp to Arent Cornelisz. Among these are letters dated June 5 and June 19, July 13 and September 24, 1582.<sup>20</sup> This shows that Thomas van Tielt and Taffin were living in the same city, Antwerp, during the period when the letter was written. As far as can be ascertained, the information written in W. te Water's publication concerning the author of the Belgic Confession is reliable.

### The Source of the Quotation

The results of our investigation provoke the question of whether it is possible that the original letter still exists. If it had survived more than two hundred years when J. W. te Water copied a sentence of it in his father's publication on the Belgic Confession, it is possible that the letter is still hidden somewhere.

A search was done, and the letter was discovered in Delft.<sup>21</sup> The letter is rather lengthy, covering well over two pages. It begins with an explanation for Arent Cornelisz of why this letter is late, but Thomas van Tielt soon discusses the ecclesiastical situation. The issue that dominates the letter is "de sake van Leijden," the Leiden issue. Although his name is not mentioned in the letter, Van Tielt must refer to Caspar Coolhaes, who had been excommunicated by a provincial Synod in March of 1582, but was supported by the magistrate of the city of Leiden.<sup>22</sup> Van Tielt writes that he had discussed this with Villiers and Taffin. He continues by mentioning two specific issues. The first is that some preachers had given the impression that they had a deviating opinion of God's predestination and providence. The second issue has to do with the question of whether church discipline should be entrusted to the government.

This is followed by the paragraph in which the author of the Belgic Confession is identified. The whole section is again longer than quoted by Van Langeraad and reads:

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<sup>20</sup> These letters by Taffin were published by J. J. van Toorenenbergen, *Bijzamen uit onderscheidene kerkelijke archieven* (Werken der Marnix-Vereeniging, Serie III, Deel V; Utrecht: Kemink & Zoon, 1885) 197–206.

<sup>21</sup> This letter is kept in the municipal archives of the city of Delft, archive of the Reformed church, arch. nr. 445, inv. nr. 49. I wish to thank our librarian, Ms. M. Van der Velde, for pursuing this, and Mr. Peter Hofland, head of Public Services at Delft, for making the letter available to me.

<sup>22</sup> On Coolhaes, see the article by W. Nijenhuis in *BLGNP*, 4.100–102.

I have spoken with Taffinus about the confession, which he says was made by Guy de Brès and presented in French to his Majesty. [He] has given me this copy of the same confession, which I send to you. Villiers and Taffin can hardly give better information concerning this issue.<sup>23</sup>

This explains why the author of the Confession was mentioned in the letter. At the time, the Dutch churches continued to use the first edition of the Belgic Confession, although the French edition had been revised at the Synod of Antwerp 1566. The difference between the two versions had become an issue in the doctrinal struggles of the 1580s. Thomas van Tielt may have been asked to provide a copy of the revised French text, and may have contacted Taffin to obtain one. At any rate, Taffin gave him the revised version and added the information that the original text of the Confession had been written by Guido de Brès. This apparently unexpected piece of information was welcome at a time when the value of the Confession was in dispute. The information that Guido de Brès was the author of the Belgic Confession is authentic and reliable.

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<sup>23</sup> The original text is: “Ic hebbe Taffinus gesproken van de co[n]fessie, de welcke hij seijt van Guij de Brès gestelt te sijne en[de] in Walsch aan Sijne M[a]jesteit] gepresenteert te sijne: heeft mij dit exemplaar gegeven vande zelviger co[n]fessie, twelck ic u [lieden] seijnde. Villiers en[de] Taffin connen qualijcks beeter bescheidt geven van desen handel.”