

Problems with Proof Texts: The Proof Texts of Article 11 of the Belgic Confession and Their Implications for the Confession

The early history of the Belgic Confession is obscured by the smoke of the stakes. The Confession was made when the Reformed in the southern part of The Netherlands (now Belgium) were persecuted. Adriaen Van Haemstede's *Book of Martyrs* contains several records of people executed for their faith around 1560. Preaching was done in secret, and meetings were held under the guise of attending fairs. As a result, we have only incidental information concerning the origin of the Belgic Confession: early copies, remarks made by people who were interrogated during the persecution at Doornik in 1561, and some regulations in the Acts of early synods in Belgium.¹ The main source for our knowledge of the Belgic Confession is the Confession itself.

Details may provide some further insight. One such detail can be found in the original proof texts added to Article 11 of the Confession. In the literature, little attention has been focussed on the texts originally printed in the margin of the articles. Two authors who did consider the proof texts showed in their own way that the proof texts for Article 11 are problematic. Lepusculus Vallensis, in his text edition of the Confession,

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¹ The best study on the history of the Belgic Confession can be found in the introduction of the text edition given by J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften* (2nd ed.; Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976) 1–27.

has spent considerable effort evaluating the proof texts and assigning them to their appropriate place. However, the texts belonging to Article 11 baffled him, and he changed several and added question marks to others.² C. Vonk simply ignored the marginal texts in this case and printed out pages of texts concerning the Holy Spirit, which Guido de Brès quoted in his *Baston de la Foy*.³ The question remains as to how and why these unsuitable texts came to be added to the article. A closer look at these texts may provide some insight into the Belgic Confession and its history.

In this article, we will first survey the history of the marginal texts in general. Next, we will present a solution for the problem of the marginal texts belonging to Article 11. Finally, we will draw some general conclusions for the Belgic Confession.

History

The sixteenth-century editions of the Belgic Confession (1561) were printed with marginal references to Scripture.⁴ By adding these, the Belgic Confession followed the example of the Gallican Confession (1559), an important source for the Belgic Confession. It is remarkable that originally only Articles 4–6 of the Belgic Confession did not have any marginal texts. A partial explanation can be found for Articles 4 and 6, which contain an enumeration of the canonical and apocryphal books, but this does not explain why Article 5 and the last part of Article 6 were left without texts.⁵ These articles were probably seen as elaborations of Article 3, and therefore not in need of additional textual references.

With some articles, the marginal texts were placed roughly next to the statements they support. More often, they form an uninterrupted column. In the latter situation, the proof texts belonging to one article are separated

² Lepusculus Vallensis, *De Nederlandsche Geloofsbelijdenis* (2nd ed.; Zwolle: Uitgave voor Gereformeerde Publicaties, 1952) 55. This book was translated in an edited version by R. Vermeulen, *The Belgic Confession and Its Biblical Basis* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1993) where the questionable texts have simply been left out.

³ C. Vonk, *De Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis* (2 vols.; Voorzeide Leer IIIA–B; Barendrecht: Drukkerij “Barendrecht,” 1955–1956) 1.267–272.

⁴ I used a copy of the *Confession de Foy* (n.p., 1561), which Bakhuizen van den Brink has identified as having been printed by Abel Clemence in Rouen. See his *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 11.

⁵ The revisers of the confession in 1566 obviously thought this was improper and added two texts to Art. 5; see Balhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften*, 76.

from the texts belonging to the next article by the indication in the margin that a new article begins. The transition from the texts belonging to one article to the texts belonging to the next article often does not coincide with the beginning of the next article. To separate the texts belonging to the one article from the texts belonging to the following article, a heading is inserted, for example, “article viii.”⁶ In those cases, the order of the texts and the content of the article must determine which statement is supported by which text.

The specific references are usually indicated in two ways: by verse and letter. For example, the text quoted in the beginning of Article 3 is given in the margin as “2. Pier.l.d.21.” This proves that at the time the older letter division and the newer verse division still existed side by side. In other cases, only the letter division is given, as is the case with the first text used with Article 1: “2 Cor.3.d.” In some cases, a chapter is indicated where a specific section is meant. The second text in the margin of Article 1 is John 4, and obviously verse 24 is meant in the wider context of 20–24.

These marginal texts were removed by the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619. When the Remonstrants had to submit their objections to the confessions, they started off by stating a number of general problems concerning the Belgic Confession. They brought up three problems in connection with the texts, the first being whether the marginal texts of the Catechism and Confession should be considered a part of the Confession, so that possible inaccuracies would reflect on the confessional statements themselves. The second problem was whether subscription to the Confession meant that one was bound to interpret the texts in the Bible in the same sense that they were used in the Confession. The third problem concerned the differences in the marginal texts between the several editions of the Confession.⁷

The Synod responded by authorizing an edition of the Belgic Confession without marginal texts.⁸ The Dutch editions published after the Synod of Dort do not include additional proof texts. The Synod of Dort was inconsistent by omitting the marginal proof texts of the Belgic Confession while maintaining the proof texts of the Heidelberg Catechism and even adding marginal proof texts to the Canons of Dort. They were obviously

⁶ Actually, the marginal indication “article viii” occurs by mistake also at the beginning of the texts belonging to Art. 7.

⁷ See *Historisch Verhael... Uytgegeven Van weghen de Kercken-Dienaeren Remonstranten* (n.p., 1623), fol. 70v., 71r.

⁸ See H. H. Kuyper, *De Post-Acta* (Amsterdam: Hoveker & Wormser, n.d.) 355, with a reference to Voetius, *Politica Ecclesiastica*, 4.19.

not averse to proof texts in general.

The English edition printed in the Constitution of the Reformed Dutch Church (1793) has followed the Synod of Dort in leaving out the proof texts. This omission is continued in the present edition for the Christian Reformed Church. Other editions have changed the original proof texts. A later version used by the Reformed Church in America, reproduced by Philip Schaff, included a partly different set of proof texts.⁹ In the edition used by the Canadian Reformed Churches, they have been revised. As a result, the problem of the proof texts added to Article 11 has largely gone unnoticed, and it has not been discussed.

Solution

Article 11 speaks of the divinity of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ The first marginal text, Genesis 1:1, does not speak of the Holy Spirit but of God's creating the heavens and the earth. An easy solution to this problem would be to take it as a misprint for Genesis 1:2, which does refer to the Holy Spirit. It is small wonder that occasional misprints occur in these marginal texts. In this case, however, the solution does not satisfy, for the two following texts, Hebrews 1:3 and 11:3, do not speak of the Spirit either. Even more problematic is the next marginal text: John 1:3. In addition to having nothing to do with the Holy Spirit, it is even repeated five lines later. These are more than plain misprints. There is something fundamentally wrong.

Going over these texts, we discover that they all speak about creation. The first three mention that God created the world from nothing (Gen. 1:1; Heb. 1:3; 11:3). The following five emphasize the comprehensiveness of God's creative work (John 1:3; Ps. 33:6; Ps. 101:3 [this should probably be corrected to Ps. 100:3]; Jer. 32:17; Mal. 2:10).

These references are followed by John 15:26. This text records the words of Jesus: "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me." There is no indication of creation; instead, the text deals with the Holy Spirit. This can be taken as the first text printed in the margin of Article 11, which actually fits the subject matter of the article.

The next texts mentioned are Psalm 104 and Amos 4:13. Psalm 104

⁹ See Ph. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (3 vols.; 1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 3.394.

¹⁰ The following texts are mentioned in the section dealing with Art. 11: Gen. 1:1; Heb. 1:3; 11:3; John 1:3; Ps. 33:6; 101:3; Jer. 32:17; Mal. 2:10; John 1:3; 15:26; Ps. 104; Amos 4:13; John 14:16, 26. Note that John 1:3 occurs twice.

does contain a reference to the Spirit (see v. 30), but in view of the general character of the reference, it is more probable that it is mentioned to support the doctrine of creation. This is confirmed by the fact that Amos 4:13 speaks of God's forming the mountains and creating the wind.

John 14:16 and 26 can only be taken as references to the confession of the Holy Spirit. When they are taken together with John 15:26, mentioned before, the strong impression is given that they are used to confirm the doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Article 11.

We must conclude that only a few of the marginal texts belonging to Article 11 actually concern the Holy Spirit. Most texts speak of creation, which is actually the doctrine summarized in the next article. The impression that they belong to Article 12 becomes even stronger when we look at the double use of John 1:3. This text can be matched with two statements from Article 12. The first reference belongs to the first line of the article, emphasizing that God made all things. Here the latter part of John 1:3 is in view. The second reference belongs to the third line of the article, that God made all things by his Word, that is his Son, on the basis of the first part of John 1:3. By now, the conclusion is obvious that a number of the proof texts belonging to the next article dealing with creation have become mixed with the proof texts of Article 11.

Under the marginal heading "article xii," the first textual reference is Isaiah 40:26:¹¹ "Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?" This text fits perfectly with the article it is connected to, for Article 12 speaks of God's work of creation. The second text mentioned is Daniel 14:4. At first glance, this may be taken as a misprint, since the book of Daniel has only twelve chapters. However, there is an apocryphal addition to Daniel, where this verse reads: "Then Daniel said to the king, None do I worship save the Lord, the God who created the heaven and the earth, even him who has sovereignty over all flesh."¹² This text, as well, must have been included to support the doctrine of creation.

The next six marginal texts printed under the heading of Article 12

¹¹ The whole list of marginal texts is: Isa. 40:26; Dan. 14:4; Matt. 28:19; 1 John 5; Acts 5:3; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:11; Rom. 8:9; Col. 1:16; 1 Tim. 4:3; Heb. 3:4; Rev. 4:21; 11:16; Heb. 1:24; Ps. 103:21; 34:8; John 8:44; 2 Peter 2:4; Luke 8:31; Matt. 25:41; Acts 23:8; Matt. 4.

¹² This part of Daniel is usually quoted as a separate book entitled "Bel and the Dragon." The translation is quoted from the Revised Version. See R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English* (2 vols.; 1913; repr., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971) 1.659.

contain several problems. None speaks of creation, but all can be connected with the previous article. We discuss them briefly in order: Matthew 28:19 mentions baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This text is used to support the second part of Article 11, where the Spirit is called the third person of the Trinity. The next text only mentions a chapter: 1 John 5. The reference will be to the well-known “comma johanneum”: “for there are three that testify in heaven: the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one.” This text is not well attested in the manuscripts and is now generally seen as not belonging to the canonical text. Acts 5:3 teaches that the Holy Spirit is God, particularly when it is read in connection with the following verse. The next two references are taken from 2 Corinthians and seem to be slightly off: 3:16 is probably a reference to verse 17, and 6:11 could be a misprint for 6:6. The next proof text, Romans 8:9, clearly refers to the Holy Spirit. This means that six texts, printed with Article 12, actually belong to Article 11.

The following texts (Col. 1:16; 1 Tim. 4:3; Heb. 3:4; Rev. 4:21 [probably a misprint for 4:11]) all speak of creation. The next group of texts belonging to Article 12 all deal with angels if two small corrections may be made: Hebrews 2:24 (should be 14); Psalm 103:21; and Psalm 34:8 (now v. 7). The final group of texts refer to the devils (John 8:44; 2 Peter 2:4; Luke 8:31; Matt. 25:41; Acts 23:8; Matt. 4[:lf]). These three groups of texts follow the subjects discussed in Article 12.

We can conclude that, generally speaking, the texts belonging to Articles 11 and 12 are correctly used, but they are incorrectly placed. Texts belonging to Article 12 have been placed in the margin of the previous article and texts belonging to Article 11 have been placed in the margin of the following article. They make sense when connected with the right context. Actually, the order of the proof texts closely follows the development of thought in the articles themselves.

Conclusions

The question can be asked whether there is any benefit in reconstructing the original marginal texts. It may give a certain sense of satisfaction to be able to straighten out these texts, but they are no longer used, since they have either been dropped or changed. What could be the benefit for our understanding of the Belgic Confession? On further consideration, several positive results may be pointed out.

In the first place, it is not necessary to write off the original marginal texts. There is the occasional misprint, but overall the list of texts has proven to be reliable. Even a detail as baffling as the double reference to

John 1:3 fits exactly with the flow of the article. This means that the texts can be used in the interpretation of the meaning of the articles. A careful look at the texts that are referred to is helpful for understanding where the emphasis is placed in the progression of thought.

In the second place, it must be called an impoverishment to leave the texts out altogether. This was done by the Synod of Dort in a specific situation and in reaction to a question from the side of the Remonstrants. It wanted to avoid the impression that the Confession should determine the exegesis of the proof texts. The Reformed view on the relationship between God and the people he created was not supported by just a few texts but by the whole doctrine of Scripture. In the context of that debate, it was probably unavoidable to omit the proof texts, although the same rule was not applied to the canons that the Synod itself drew up. It is regrettable today to persist in omitting the texts. Restoring them (after careful scrutiny) would be beneficial, for the texts show the scriptural basis of the Confession. The intention of the Belgic Confession is not to come with its own doctrine but to faithfully present the teaching of Scripture. The Confession should not live a life of its own, and it should always be made clear how the Confession rests on God's revelation.

As a third benefit, we can point to the incident of the reference to Daniel 14. Surprisingly, a doctrine was supported by a reference to an apocryphal writing. The apocryphal books are dealt with in Article 6, stating that we may not use their witness to prove some point of faith. Yet, this did not prevent Guido de Brès from using apocryphal texts in the margin, for Article 37 has a marginal reference to the apocryphal book of Wisdom, 5. In Article 11, we have now discovered another example. Obviously, De Brès took seriously the statement in Article 6 of the Belgic Confession, that the church may take instruction from the apocryphal books on issues that are in agreement with the canonical books.

A fourth benefit of studying these proof texts is that this may provide us with further insight into the history behind the printed Confession. Somehow, the texts belonging to Articles 11 and 12 became mixed up. The first texts in the margin of both articles actually belong to Article 12. Texts supporting the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as stated in Article 11 are mixed with texts dealing with creation. How could this have happened?

The remote cause of this mistake was the fact that more proof texts were added to Articles 10 and 11 than could be accommodated in the margin. The many texts belonging to Article 10 may have pushed down the texts belonging to Article 11. The result was that the majority of the texts belonging to Article 11 ended up in the margin of Article 12. This caused a

problem in Article 12, which itself has a considerable number of proof texts (in my reconstruction, a total of twenty-eight). It was impossible to find room for all these texts in the remaining marginal space of Article 12. For that reason, these texts were written in a second column in the margin, beginning at the same height where Article 11 began, and thus actually beginning at a higher level than the texts belonging to Article 11. When the two columns of texts were merged into one, texts belonging to Article 12 were mistakenly placed in the margin of Article 11, and most texts belonging to Article 11 were placed in the margin of Article 12.

Where was the actual mistake made? The easiest solution would be to attribute it to the printer. Guido de Brès lived in Belgium, but the Confession was published in France. Assuming, as seems reasonable, that the Confession was not printed under his supervision, the printer misunderstood the two columns of the manuscript copy and combined them. There is, however, an insurmountable problem with this solution: The list of proof texts for Articles 10, 11, and 12 is identical in the two editions of 1561. The Clémence edition and the Frelon edition print the same list of texts in the same order.

This cannot be explained by assuming that one publisher simply reprinted the text as he found it in the publication of the other publisher. Bakhuizen van den Brink has proven conclusively that the two versions differ in many details.¹³ The fact that the proof texts have wrongly been assigned in both editions is an indication that both printers received the same list. The mistake in the proof texts was not made by the printer but one stage earlier by the copyists who wrote out the manuscript copies for the publishers. We must also assume that Guido de Brès did not have the opportunity to check this version carefully before it was sent off to the two printers in France.

If this fourth result led us to the shaky ground of possibilities, the final result for the Confession is clearer. We can confidently state that the Confession was printed without Guido de Brès' having checked over the galley proofs. That was understandable in the situation, when he worked in Belgium, and the Confession was printed in his absence in France. We can therefore expect small misprints, which the publisher's proofreader would not easily spot.

Since the original proof texts can be taken seriously, further study of them could add to our knowledge of the early history of the Belgic Confession and our understanding of the meaning of the articles.

¹³ J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, "Quelques notes sur l'histoire de la Confession des Pays-Bas en 1561 et 1566," *Ecclesia* 2 (1966) 296–308.