



The Belgic Confession of Faith: Its background

The Belgic Confession of Faith is the oldest one of the three doctrinal standards of the Reformed Churches of Dutch origin. It dates from 1561, whereas the Heidelberg Catechism was published in 1563, and the Canons of Dordt adopted in 1619. It is usually spoken of as the *Belgic* or *Netherlandish* Confession of Faith.

These two geographical adjectives are practically identical in meaning, historically speaking. In the days of Caesar, the inhabitants who founded the Republic of the Seven Provinces were spoken of as France, were spoken of as Belgi, and their language as Belgic.

But later on the name "Netherlanders" or people of the "lowlands" became current. During the reign of Charles V there were seventeen "Netherlandish" provinces united under his crown, and of these, eight were located in what is now called Belgium. During the Eighty Years' War, and as a result of that great struggle, these seventeen "United Netherland" provinces were separated. The people who founded the Republic of the Seven Provinces were spoken of in those days as *Northern* Netherlanders, to distinguish them from the *Southern* Netherlanders, who now belong to the kingdom of Belgium, and to whom the name Belgian and its derivatives are usually limited in our days. But originally "Belgic" and "Netherlandish" were synonyms.

The author of this Confession of Faith himself was born in the Southern Netherlands, namely, at Mons (Flemish=Bergen), the capital of the Province of Hainault, a city owing its origin to a fortress erected there by Caesar during his campaign against the Gauls. This author was Guido de Brés, also known as Guy De Bray, born most likely in the year 1522, the son of Jean de Brés, a painter. During his infancy his mother was a devout member of the Roman Catholic Church, and more than once expressed as her wish that her son might prove to be a useful instrument for the propagation of the true religion. Her wish was to be fulfilled, but in a different sense than she had in mind. Young de Brés became a painter on glass (*glas schilder*). Somehow he became acquainted with the Bible and books bearing on the Reformation, and the new light on the old religion, which came to him through these volumes, so illumined his mind and influenced his will that between the eighteenth and twenty-fifth year of his life, he broke with the Roman Church.

Up to the year 1548 he continued in Mons, but soon after that date, when a bloody religious persecution was started in his native land, he fled to England, where he became acquainted with exiled leaders of the Dutch Reformation in those days, such as his countryman Dathenus and the Pole à Lasco. Four years later we find him back in the Southern Netherlands, as an itinerant preacher of the Reformation, with the town of Lille (Flemish=Rijsel, now belonging to France), as his headquarters. But he did not long remain there.

New persecutions drove him to Germany, where very likely he met John Calvin, then the rising leader of the Reformed people. During 1555 and the beginning of 1557, the young preacher was in Switzerland where he continued his studies in Lausanne and Geneva. Within a couple of years he was back again in his native land, where he married Catherine Ramont. He preached not only in Lille, but also at Tournay (Flemish=Doornik), a city situated on both banks of the Scheldt River, and one of the most ancient towns in Belgium.

It was during these days that he labored on the "Confession of Faith," with which his name was to be linked permanently. He prepared it in conjunction with Saravia, later Professor of Theology in Leyden, and afterward at Cambridge, where he died in 1613; and Rev. H. Moded (for some time

chaplain of William of Orange), and consulted other Reformed leaders of his day, possibly Calvin himself.

The “Confession” originally was written in the French language. In fact it was to some extent patterned after the Confession of Faith of the Reformed Church of France, which had been drawn up under the guiding direction of John Calvin and published in 1559. The work of de Brés and his collaborators was first printed in 1561. During the night between November 1 and 2, 1561, a copy of it, carefully wrapped up, was thrown over the wall of the Castle of Tournay, hoping that it might come under the eyes of commissioners of the Spanish King, Philip II, then LORD of the Netherlands, these commissioners being charged with the uprooting of all heresy as rebellion against the legal authorities, yea, against God himself.

The *preface* of the Confession protested against the charge of the Reformed people being rebels. Notwithstanding their being exposed to the most cruel persecution, they obeyed the government in all things lawful. At the same time this preface breathed the spirit of Christian martyrs — witnesses for Christ. Rather than deny Christ, so it was declared, the thousands of Reformed believers, whose convictions were expressed in the Confession, would “*offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire, well knowing that those who follow Christ must take up the cross and deny themselves.*” What language of exalted heroism!

Before long de Brés himself was to be such a witness — unto death. In 1567, while he and Peregrin de la Grange were the much-beloved and diligent pastors of Valenciennes, in Northern France, the city was taken by the foes of the Reformation marshalled under the banner of Spain. De Brés and his colleague had fled, but were taken prisoner and cruelly bound and brought back to Valenciennes. From his prison, a miserable dungeon, the author of the Confession wrote letters of comfort to his brethren in the faith, to his old mother, and his wife and children, and prepared for his death as if it were to be a marriage feast.

He told one who came to visit him in his prison that the clanking of his chains was sweet music in his ears because he bore them for the sake of his LORD and His doctrines of free grace. But this testimony the more enraged his persecutors, and in the night between the 30th and 31st day of May of the year 1567, both de Brés and de la Grange, testifying to the last, suffered the death of martyrdom by means of hanging.

But already before he died, de Brés’s *Confession of Faith* had been translated into the Dutch language, 1562, and after some revision and abridgment, had been publicly adopted by the Synod of Antwerp, 1566. At the Church Convent held at Wesel, 1568, agreement with it was demanded of the preachers (Chapter 2 and 8 of its Articles), and finally, after some more revision, the Great Synod of Dordt, April 21, 1619, stamped it with its approval as one of the *Standards* of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

Since that time the Belgic Confession has become one of the recognized symbols of Reformed Churches of Dutch origin throughout the world, including those churches in the United States of America. Its translation into English was undertaken in 1788 by a Committee of the Reformed Church in America, of which Dr. J. H. Livingstone was a member. A Committee of the Christian Reformed Church went over it, and its report was approved in final form by its Synod of 1912.

It is our conviction that the Belgic Confession of Faith is squarely built on the Bible, its statements backed up by Holy Writ. We are also convinced that the welfare of Reformed Christendom in the New World will be promoted and maintained by a proper appreciation and loyal holding of this citadel of truth, erected in the Old World, in days when one jeopardized and often, as de Brés, forfeited his life, for rearing and defending its ramparts.

In order to promote the appreciation and the maintaining of this time-honored creed, this book is written, hoping and trusting it will not only be considered a precious *heirloom* of the fathers, but continue to be raised and carried forward as a *standard* of the LORD, lifted up in the power of the Spirit, when the enemy comes in like a flood, Isaiah 59:19. We trust it may also be a flag around which shall rally the scattered members of our Reformed family of Dutch origin in America. May we

experience the truth of the mottoes of our fathers, already well-known in the days of de Brés: “Eendracht Maakt Macht (Unity Makes Strength),” and: “Concordia res parvae crescunt (Concord makes small things flourish).”

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