

## **What We Believe**

### **A Commentary on the Belgic Confession**

*This introduction to a proposed book on the Belgic Confession was sent in by our Christian Reformed missionary to the Philippines, Rev. J. Tangelder, for publication in the Outlook. The article seems especially appropriate and helpful in meeting current attacks on the creeds and questions in many minds about their rightful place.*

#### **A. An apology for the confession**

##### **1. Study a confession?**

I believe that an apology for the writing of this short commentary is necessary as even within Reformed circles the validity of the confessions is called into question.

Why do we need to study the historic Belgic Confession in our post-Christian and rapidly secularizing society? Isn't the confession time-bound, conditioned by the historic movements of the 16th century Reformation in Europe? Why has it been adopted as one of the confessions of the Christian Reformed Church in North America as well as the Christian Reformed Church of the Philippines and many other Reformed denominations in many different nations? Isn't there a revival of dialogue between the Church of Rome and the churches of the Reformation? Aren't there great changes taking place in the Roman Catholic Church?

Of course, we must be careful when we discuss Catholicism. The current situation makes everything complex. The old illusion of a solid, unified church has been shattered. There is now a great variety of thought and practice. Today, the Roman Catholic Church appears to be as divided and pluriform as Protestantism. Time Magazine (May 24, 1974) had as cover story - The Roman Catholic Church "A Church Divided." We are faced with the questions: What does it really believe? What must we think about the Roman Catholic charismatics, traditionalists and the liberation theologians? Has the Church of Rome really changed, or is its old boast of changelessness and irreformability true? We live in "global village," and the winds of change blow everywhere. Yes! But we must bear in mind that the Roman Catholic Church has never rejected its pronouncements and anathema of the Council of Trent (1545-63). The second Vatican Council (1962-65) has frequently reiterated the endorsements of both Vatican I (1870) and the Council of Trent. It came down firmly on the side of the traditional doctrine of the mass. The virgin Mary even received a new title - "mother of the church." And Vatican II called for "a generous encouragement to the cult of the Blessed Virgin, especially to the liturgical cult." (1)

The winds of change are also blowing within Protestantism. Mainline denominations are declining in influence and membership. One of today's key issues is the inerrancy of Scriptures. Dr. Francis Schaeffer commented: "Holding to a strong view of Scripture or not holding to it is the watershed of the evangelical world." (2) The former editor of *Christianity Today*, Dr. Harold Lindsell, has furthered the cause of orthodoxy through highlighting the problem in his book *The Battle For The Bible*.

## **2. Abstract Doctrine?**

Who needs an exposition of the Belgic Confession? We need a practical handbook on living. But Biblical doctrine is never abstract. Doctrine and life are intertwined and inseparable. Doctrine and life are not opposites. We must be orthodox not only in doctrine but also in practice. We are called to live our confession (Tit. 2:7, 10:2; John 9-11; Rom. 16:17, 18).

## **3. What is a Confession?**

The word "confess" means "to say together." A confession is not the response of an individual believer to God's revelation in the Bible, but the church's response. You always believe together. Therefore, a confession is a communal expression of faith. In a confession the church doesn't only express her communal faith, but also sets herself against error. In crisis times the church has always felt the need to speak in articulate language about God, creation, revelation, fall, redemption and things to come.

The Scripture is our only rule for faith and practice. Of course, the inscripturated Word of God alone is the "power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16), and it alone can bring reformation to a deformed church. The confession is a repetition of God's Word, a summary of its great doctrines. Through her confession the church expresses her hope, and receives consolation and encouragement, but she also knows that wolves in sheep's clothing are ready to devour her (Matt. 7:15; 24:4, 5).

## **4. Theologians vs. Confessions?**

As I have shown, the drawing up of a confession is a communal activity. It is not the work of a few theological experts. Yet the articles of the Belgic Confession are the fruit of theological reflection. We cannot divorce theological activity from the formulation of confessions. Helpful use was made of the theological expertness of Calvin, Beza, Ursinus and many others. Dr. C. VanTil remarks about the making of confession and the work of systematic theologians: "The creeds of the Church are, as far as their content is concerned, no more than a systematic statement of the truth of Scripture. They are distinguished from the systematic statement of Scripture given by systematic theology (a) by their brevity, limiting themselves as they do to the most essential matters, and (b) by their authoritative character, since they have been officially accepted as standards by the councils of the Church. Once these standards of dogmas of the Church have been accepted, it goes without saying that a theologian who writes a work on systematics will write in accordance with the interpretation given in these standards. To say that this hampers his freedom is to say that he has not himself freely adopted these creeds as a member of the Church." (3)

## **5. Scripture or Creed?**

The nature of the confession itself demonstrates that the choice is never between Scripture or creed! Since earliest times, the church had a confession in the objective sense of the term, in which she stated in speech or writing the precious doctrines of salvation.

A confession is not above or beside but under the Word of God. It has authority because it agrees with the Word of God and repeats and transmits it. So, the churches of the Reformation in the 16th century were convinced that the Belgic Confession confessed the Bible. The Westminster Confession says about this subordinate role of the confessions: "All synods or councils since the apostles' times whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith practice, but to be used as a help in both. (3) Dr. L. Berkhof remarked about the relationship of Scripture and creed: "Since the reflection of the Church is often determined and deepened by doctrinal controversies, the formulations to which Church Councils or Synods are finally led under the guidance of the Holy Spirit often bear the earmarks of past struggles. They are not infallible but yet have a high degree of stability. And they are authoritative, not merely because they are proposed by the Church, but FORMALLY as defined by the Church and MATERIALLY as based on the Word of God." (4)

## **6. Does the Bible Teach Doctrine?**

This is an important question in our experience – orientated age. The apostle Paul speaks about "sound doctrine" (literally, "healthful doctrine" (Titus 2:1). This very expression presupposed a body of teaching. There is a "deposit of faith" (1 Tim. 6:10; 2 Tim. 1:13, 14). Dr. A. Kuyper points to Heb. 6:1ff. where it is written: "Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go unto perfection." And then the writer of the letter to the Hebrews sums up the doctrine of Christ: 1. Repentance from dead works; 2. Faith towards God; 3. Doctrine of baptism; 4. Laying on of hands; 5. The resurrection of the dead; 6. Eternal judgment of God. (5)

Elders must admonish regarding the maintenance of "sound doctrine" (Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9,10). False doctrine is like a "sore that eats away the flesh" (1 John 2:26). False teachers are like seducers (1 John 2:26) The Puritan Thomas Watson called these seducers "the devil's factors; they are of all others the greatest felons that would rob you of the truth. Seducers have silver tongues, that can put off bad wares; they have a sleight to deceive." (6)

## **7. Are Creeds Binding?**

The authority of the creeds is easily discredited in our day. But the church is not a debating club. It is a confessing community. The New Testament does not know a congregation without a binding creed (cf. Rev. 2:14, 15, 20). Office bearers sign the form of subscription because the confessions and creeds are in agreement with the Word of God. When truth is denied, the unity of the church is broken.

A confession is binding unless it is shown that it is in disagreement with the Word of God. Believers in the Reformed churches have the right to expect that the teaching of the church be honoured.

## **8. Revision of the Creeds?**

Do we need new confessions and creeds for our time? How can 16th century document articulate the Christian faith for modern man? Isn't the Belgic Confession a dead weight around the neck of the church? Isn't the confession an imperfect and temporal way of expressing the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Although we could perhaps add to the confession by giving a more detailed exposition on the nature and authority of Scripture to meet the heresies of our day, I believe that the Reformed churches are in no position today to do so because of their lack of theological clarity and unity.

My conviction is: We do not need renovation. We have enough to do when we study what the Reformation and especially what the early church has said. Furthermore, the truth of the Scriptures remains unchanged. The great facts of creation, the fall, redemption, and the sacraments remain the same. Why change the confession if it only repeats the Word of God?

Have the enemies of the church so greatly changed that a new revised creed is needed? The enemies have remained the same. Old heresies have new names. For example, Arianism and Socinianism found a modern home in the sect of the Jehovah Witnesses. I agree with Dr. C. VanTil's observation: "What the Church needs is a more exact formulation of its doctrines against heresies as they appear in every new and changing form, and a fuller statement of a Biblical truth." (7)

## **B. Historical Background**

### **Guido deBres 11522-671.**

The Belgic Confession was formulated in the 16th century Reformation period. There was a return to the study of the Word of God. Reformation churches were founded. And martyrs laid down their lives "for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3).

The man responsible for the confession was Guido deBres. Little is known of his early youth. He was born in a Roman Catholic home in about 1522, studied the Bible and prior to 1547 he broke away from his church. He fled to England in about 1548 where he joined a refugee congregation in London. During 1522-56 he was a traveling pastor. He was a hunted man, preaching illegally as the Netherlands neared revolt against the Spanish oppressor. He studied at Geneva and Lausanne, Switzerland and became pastor in Doornik. He drew up a statement of faith, which is

now called the Belgic Confession and he threw it over the wall of Doornik's castle during the night of Nov. 1-2, 1561.

Why was the Belgic Confession written? Guido deBres wanted to show Philip II of Spain that Protestants were not heretics but Christ-believers who only wanted to remain true to the Bible. He wanted to defend "the churches under the cross" in the Southern Netherlands.

Was Guido deBres the sole author of the confession – his individual, private response to God's Word? No! He was assisted by Adrian Saravia, H. Modetus, and Godfrey van Wingen. He also drew heavily on the 1559 Gallic Confession, written for the Huguenot churches by John Calvin.

The confession was published in Rouen in 1561, and in 1563 it appeared in German and in Dutch. In 1566 it was published again in a slightly shorter form in Dutch and French. It was received with great enthusiasm by the Calvinist churches of the Netherlands. It was adopted as a confession in Antwerp (1566), Wesel (1568), Dort (1574) and Middelburg (1581). The text of the confession went through various alterations until the final form was adopted by the Synod of Dort (1618-19). The story of the confession shows that it was not written in isolation. It was a communal effort. It was the result of interaction with other theologians and confessions. The confession was carefully considered by the churches and accepted by the churches.

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