

**THE**  
**BELGIC**  
**CONFESSION**

**A COMMENTARY**



# THE BELGIC CONFESSION

A COMMENTARY



VOLUME 1

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*To Ruth*



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## PREFACE

**B**oth the members of the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed community of churches worldwide need a commentary on the Belgic Confession of Faith. Regarding the former, their theologians have published commentaries on the Heidelberg Catechism and on the Canons of Dordt. But a commentary on the Belgic Confession is lacking. This commentary intends to supply this lack.

Regarding the Reformed churches throughout the world, to the best of my knowledge there is no commentary in English on the Belgic Confession in print today.

There is, almost certainly, no full-scale commentary on the Confession in print that does full justice to the sound Reformed doctrine of the creed. Such a commentary not only would not blur, or even corrupt, the doctrines of the creed, under the pressure of false doctrines that are at home today even in churches that are reputed to be “conservative.” But such a commentary would expose, refute, and condemn the contemporary departures from, or corruptions of, the Reformed, Christian orthodoxy of the Belgic Confession, as the Confession itself requires and enables the Reformed church to do.

The Confession itself requires this exposure, refutation,

and condemnation of doctrines that depart from the truths it teaches inasmuch as the Confession is an official, authoritative, binding standard of gospel truth for Reformed churches everywhere. It is one of the three forms of unity that function as official creeds of almost all Reformed churches everywhere. By an instrument known as the Formula of Subscription (adopted by the Synod of Dordt in 1618–19), all officebearers in Reformed churches vow that they will “refute and contradict” and “exert [themselves] in keeping the church free from...errors [that militate against the doctrines taught in the Belgic Confession.]”<sup>1</sup>

I specify.

This commentary defends the Confession’s confession that holy scripture is “infallible,” or inerrant (art. 7); that regarding origins God created the universe “of nothing” (art. 12); that the origin of the human race is God’s creating man “out of the dust of the earth” (art. 14); that the explanation of the wickedness and death of the human race is this first man’s “giving ear to the words of the devil” (art. 14); that the depravity of the fallen sinner is total (art. 14); that the source of salvation is unconditional election, accompanied by sovereign reprobation (art. 16); that Christ’s death was substitutionary atonement and that, as such, it was a death for some only, not for all (art. 20–21); that faith is a gracious gift of God, not a condition fulfilled by the sinner (art. 22); that justification is by faith alone, to the exclusion of all works of those who are justified (art. 22–24); that sanctification and the doing of good works do not qualify (“moderate”) the truth of justification (art. 24);

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1 Formula of Subscription, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 326.

## PREFACE

that there are true church institutes, and false (art. 28–29); and that the return of Christ will be according to the amillennial teaching of the last things (art. 37).

These doctrines and others, a commentary on the Belgic Confession must not only explain, but also defend.

Calvin insisted on the necessity of defending the faith by condemning errors, and that in connection with his approval of the Belgic Confession:

We do not see, however, how it would be hard for anyone who wants to be counted among the household of the church to sincerely be enlisted under Christ its head. This is impossible unless he clearly assents with upright piety, and honestly condemns errors by which the sincerity of the religion is corrupted.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, Calvin added that the church and her confessions must take note of and contend against *new, contemporary* errors: “Now the rejection of errors often depends on the circumstances. For, as Satan thinks up new ways to cause disturbances, it is necessary to counteract wisely.”<sup>3</sup>

Directly against the foolish thinking of the present time, that the peace of the church requires the tolerance of false doctrine and the demonizing of controversy, Calvin remarked that the biblical commendation of “the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3)...would be ineffective unless everyone would clearly denounce both heretical and corrupt teachings.”<sup>4</sup>

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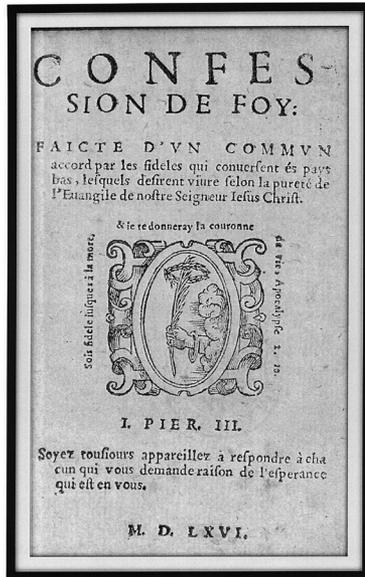
2 Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 69.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

## THE BELGIC CONFESSION: A COMMENTARY

Nevertheless, as the Belgic Confession itself is not chiefly polemical, neither is this commentary. Its purpose, like that of the Confession, is mainly instruction. It explains all the leading doctrines of the Reformed faith to the Christian reader, as these doctrines are taught in the Bible. Should the commentary fall into the hands of an unbeliever, which is heartily to be desired, it can serve the end of witness and evangelism. The enemy that the commentary envisions is not so much false doctrine as it is ignorance. This enemy, within the camp, is by no means imaginary.



An explanatory word is in order concerning the cover of this commentary. It is a replica of the cover, which was also the title page, of the original edition of the Belgic Confession in 1561. The French title at the top is translated as “Confession of Faith. Made with common consent by the believers who are scattered throughout all the

## PREFACE

Netherlands, who desire to live according to the purity of the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” At the bottom of the title page is the date of publication in Roman numerals: MDLXVI. The date is 1566 since this title page is the cover of a 1566 edition of the original 1561 edition. The 1566 edition, which was virtually unchanged from the original 1561, was officially adopted by the Reformed synod of Antwerp.

In the center of the reproduction of the cover and title page of the Confession of 1566 is a symbolic design, or printer’s mark, surrounded by a quotation of Revelation 2:10: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” This text was especially pertinent since thousands in the Lowlands of Belgium and the Netherlands were being killed, and would be killed in the near future, for their belief of and witness to the faith that is the content of the Belgic Confession. Indeed, the author of the creed would soon be among those martyrs.

The symbol on the cover is powerful. A strong arm extending from the cloud holds a palm branch topped by a crown. The strong arm of God himself assures the triumph of the truth of the gospel that is taught and defended by the Belgic Confession, regardless of the strong opposition to this gospel at the time of its publication and, one may add, at the present time. Both palm and crown are biblical symbols of victory. The arm of God is almighty.

Under the printer’s mark is a partial quotation of 1 Peter 3:15: “Be ready always to give an answer to everyone that asks you a reason of the hope that is in you.”<sup>5</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> For much of this information concerning the cover and its meaning, I am indebted to Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession*. Explanation of

citation on the cover page of the Belgic Confession speaks for itself.

The question of the Protestant Reformed reader of this commentary concerns the identity of the edition used by the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).<sup>6</sup> It is substantially the English translation of the original Confession of 1561. Changes and revisions of the Confession by various Reformed synods over the years are negligible. None involves doctrine.

Almost certainly the Confession that is current in the PRC is the translation of the Latin edition that was approved, regarding the content, by the Synod of Dordt. This was the source of the translation into English that was approved by the English-speaking churches in the Netherlands. This English translation was published in the Netherlands in 1689. In 1792 the Reformed Dutch Church in the United States (today's Reformed Church in America) adopted that English translation of the Belgic Confession. In the beginning of its history, the Christian Reformed Church carried along this edition of the Confession into its new church formation.

The PRC did the same when they were expelled from the Christian Reformed Church in 1924. That the PRC simply took with them the edition of the Belgic Confession that was used in the Christian Reformed Church prior to 1924 is evident from the footnote appended to article 36 of

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the cover of the 1566 edition of the Confession is found on pages 117–18.

6 *Confessions and Church Order*, 23–80. See also *The Psalter with Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, Church Order, and added Chorale Section*, reprinted and revised edition of the 1912 United Presbyterian *Psalter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1927; rev. ed. 1995), 37–54.

## PREFACE

the Confession. This article concerns the civil magistracy. The note speaks of the dissent to an element of the article on the part of the “Christian Reformed Church.”<sup>7</sup>

Schaff judges this translation of the Belgic Confession into English to be “excellent”: “the excellent English version in use in the Reformed Dutch Church of America.”<sup>8</sup>

A careful comparison of the original English translation adopted by the “Reformed Dutch Church in America” as found in Schaff’s *Creeeds of Christendom*<sup>9</sup> and the version of it used by the PRC reveals that the differences even in insignificant wording are few and slight. For example, whereas the original English translation has “eternal power and Godhead” in article 2, the version in use by the PRC has “power and divinity.” There is one instance of a more significant difference. In article 36, concerning the magistrates, Schaff has the Reformed believer detesting “the *error* of the Anabaptists” (emphasis added).<sup>10</sup> The psalter used by the Protestant Reformed Churches has “detest *the Anabaptists*” themselves (emphasis added),<sup>11</sup> which does not necessarily apply to the Baptists of the present day. Insertion of the words “error of” was a later revision of the original text of the Confession to avoid offending contemporary Baptists.<sup>12</sup>

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7 *Confessions and Church Order*, 74.

8 Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:507.

9 *Ibid.*, 3:383–436.

10 *Ibid.*, 3:433.

11 *Psalter with Doctrinal Standards*, 54.

12 An English translation of the original text of the Belgic Confession is “We detest all those who want to reject the Superiors and Magistrates.” In 1566 a Reformed synod inserted the word “Anabaptists,” explicitly naming the objects of detestation. This edition is regarded as authoritative. The texts changed and adopted by Dordt in 1619

## THE BELGIC CONFESSION: A COMMENTARY

All quotations of the Belgic Confession in this commentary are from the third volume of Schaff's *Creeds of Christendom* (pages 383–436). This English translation of the Belgic Confession is the edition that was published in the United States in 1767; that was adopted by the Reformed Dutch Church in the United States in 1792; and of which Schaff judged that it is “excellent.”

Regrettably, the size and substance of the Belgic Confession make publishing the commentary in one volume unsatisfactory. God willing, the second volume will appear shortly.

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changed the wording to “error of the Anabaptists,” thus moderating the condemnation. Later, the Reformed Dutch Church in America adopted the English version that had “error of.” The creed in the Protestant Reformed psalter is closer to the original. The creed in *Confessions and Church Order* follows Dordt’s softening.



## INTRODUCTION

### THE AUTHOR OF THE CONFESSION

Just as the Belgic Confession itself tends to be slighted, in comparison with the Heidelberg Catechism, which is preached regularly in Reformed churches, and with the Canons of Dordt, which is always the object of intense study on account of its controversial content, including double predestination, so also the author of the Confession seldom receives his due, even from Reformed believers.

Guido de Bres was a genuine, outstanding hero of the Reformation on behalf of the Reformed, Christian faith. His authorship itself of the Belgic Confession raises him to the highest pinnacle of honor. By his Confession and his diligent preaching, he was responsible for the gathering and establishment of Reformed churches throughout the Lowlands and in the western part of France. Then his courageous martyr's death, with its attendant moving circumstances, puts him in the ranks of the greatest heroes of the Reformed faith in all of history, indeed of the Christian religion. De Bres deserves to be mentioned and honored with Luther, Calvin, Beza, and the other worthies of Protestantism. He was a Netherlander highly honored by God.

De Bres was born into the Roman Catholic Church

and raised in the Roman religion. Sometime before he was twenty-five years old, De Bres was converted to the Reformed faith, mainly by his reading of the Bible and of Reformed materials that were flooding the Lowlands. Almost as soon as he was converted, he taught others, as he had opportunity. This public teaching of the Reformed faith brought down upon him the rage of the Roman Catholic authorities in the southern Lowlands. Several times he had to flee the country. He spent many years of his brief life in exile. On one occasion, although he escaped his foes, the high price he paid for his confession of the gospel was the burning of his house, of his library, and of himself in effigy.

In the providence of God, his flights from his persecutors, especially to Great Britain and Switzerland, brought him into contact with leading reformers, including John a Lasco, Martin Bucer, Petrus Dathenus, Martinus Micronius, and John Calvin. In fact, one of De Bres' periods of exile was spent largely in Switzerland, where he studied for some three years under Calvin. Undoubtedly, these contacts deepened his grasp of the Reformed faith and thus enabled him to write the Confession. These contacts with prominent, learned reformers served also as a kind of seminary training for De Bres, making him a more capable preacher.

De Bres met with William of Orange, the political hope of the Netherlands in its bondage. The meeting was useful to William as he planned his deliverance of the Lowlands from Spanish and Roman oppression.

In 1559 De Bres married Catherine Ramon. This godly young woman agreed to marry De Bres despite his warning that she was marrying a man with a price on his head, so that she could expect bereavement and widowhood at any

## INTRODUCTION

time. Catherine was one of the unsung heroines of the Reformation. With Catherine, De Bres had five children, all of whom were left fatherless at a young age when Rome murdered De Bres.

Even though he was often forced to flee on account of persecution, De Bres would again and again bravely return to what is now Belgium in order to preach and teach. He pastored large congregations, if only for a short time. He engaged also in field preaching, preaching to thousands in the open fields, because of the threats of the civil authorities. Armed men protected the gatherings. Thus De Bres was used by God for the salvation of many. Thus also, in spite of the eventual crushing of the Reformed churches in the southern Lowlands, his ministry bore lasting and abundant fruit in the spread of the Reformed faith and in the establishment of Reformed churches in the northern Lowlands, present-day Holland.

De Bres was a dedicated, indefatigable worker on behalf of the Reformed faith, Reformed churches, and his Lord, Jesus Christ. “Tirelessly working, shrinking back from no danger, he has made himself extraordinarily serviceable for the extension of the Reformation in the southern Netherlands and in the present-day north of France.”<sup>1</sup>

A physical description of De Bres has come down to us. He was tall. He had a pale, thin, long face. His shoulders were high. He was bearded.<sup>2</sup>

The end—the *earthly* end—of this man of God was as

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1 *Christelijke Encyclopaedie* [*Christian Encyclopedia*], ed. F. W. Grosheide, J. H. Landwehr, C. Lindeboom, and J. C. Rullmann (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1925), 1:378. All quotations from this work are my translation of the Dutch. The work has not been translated.

2 *Ibid.*, 377–78.

heroic and grand as his life. Christ privileged De Bres to die a martyr, an especially godly and courageous martyr. In July 1566, De Bres returned from exile in France, where he had been preaching, to the Lowlands. This extremely dangerous move was at the urging of Reformed believers, who desired De Bres' preaching. De Bres became pastor of a large congregation in Valenciennes. In the short time in 1566 between his return from exile and his capture, De Bres attended the first synod of the Reformed churches in the Lowlands, the synod of Antwerp. So dangerous were the circumstances of the meeting of this synod that attendance required the use of a password. The password was "the Vineyard." This synod adopted the Belgic Confession as the creed of the Reformed churches.

The next year, De Bres was finally captured by his Roman Catholic adversaries. They treated the reformer cruelly and abominably. For two weeks he was imprisoned in heavy chains in a dungeon cell in the castle over the walls of which he had earlier thrown a copy of his Confession. De Bres remained undaunted. To a visitor who remarked the heavy chains, De Bres responded, "It is guilt that makes a chain heavy. Innocence makes my chains light. I glory in them as my badges of honor."<sup>3</sup>

De Bres was then transferred for seven weeks to a prison in Valenciennes. Here he was tortured in a small, foul dungeon known as the Black Hole. For the most part he was kept in chains that bruised and cut his flesh and bones. Somehow, in these miserable, painful circumstances, De Bres managed to write a large treatise on the Lord's supper

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<sup>3</sup> Thea B. Van Halsema, *Three Men Came to Heidelberg and Glorious Heretic: The Story of Guido de Brès* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 130.

## INTRODUCTION

and moving letters to his wife and to his mother. These letters, written as it were with the last drops of his life's blood, are a moving testimony, not only to the spiritual heroism of their author, but also to the spiritual experience that characterizes the Reformed faith.

To his beloved wife of merely seven years, the mother of his five young children, De Bres said his farewell in the following words:

I call on you with all urgency that you not grieve beyond measure, so as to offend God. You have always known well, that when you married me, you have taken a mortal mate, who was uncertain of his life from moment to moment. Nevertheless, it pleased the good God to allow us to live together about seven years and to give us five children. If the Lord had willed to let us live together longer, he certainly had the means for this. But it did not please him. Wherefore let his good pleasure be realized, and may this be to you as a conclusive reason [for my imprisonment and death, and your widowhood].<sup>4</sup>

As part of his letter to his wife, De Bres also wrote the following:

O God, thou hast caused me to be born at the time and at the hour that thou hadst ordained. During my entire life thou hast preserved and protected me in threatening dangers and completely delivered

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4 A. D. R. Polman, *Onze Nederlandsche Geloofsbelijdenis* [*Our Netherlands (Belgic) Confession*] (Franeker: T. Wever, n.d.), 1:105. All quotations from this work are my translation of the Dutch. The work has not been translated.

me from them. Thus today my hour has come, in which I must leave this life in order to go to thee. Thy good will be done. I cannot escape thy hand, and even if I could, I would not will [to do so], for my highest salvation consists in this, that I conduct myself according to thy will. All these considerations have made my heart very joyful and cheerful, and they do this still. And I call on you, beloved, faithful companion, that you rejoice with me and thank the good God for what he has done...Here is not the place of our dwelling, but in heaven. Here is our pilgrim-journey. Therefore, we must long for the real land, that is, for heaven, in order to be received there in the house of my heavenly Father so that we may see our brother, head, and savior, Jesus Christ, and so that we may see the very noble fellowship of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and so many thousand martyrs, into whose fellowship I hope to be received, when I shall have completed the course of my service. I beseech you then, my dearly beloved, that you comfort yourself in the consideration of these things. Consider with full consciousness the honor God grants you by having given you a husband who is not only a minister of the Son of God, but also so esteemed by God, and valued, that he deems him worthy to have a share in the crown of the martyrs. Such an honor God does not give even to his angels. I am overjoyed. My heart is aroused. In my trials, nothing is lacking to me. I am filled to overflowing with the abundance of the riches of my God...I experience today the faithfulness of my Lord Jesus Christ. I bring now into practice what I

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have preached to others. Certainly, I must confess this, namely, that I, when I preached, spoke as a blind man about colors, if I compare it with what I now feel by experience. I have made progress and learned more in my imprisonment than in all my life. I find myself at a very good school. I have the Holy Ghost, who continually inspires me and who instructs me to handle the weapons in the conflict. On the other hand, Satan encircles me, the opponent of all children of God, who is as a roaring lion in order to devour me. But the one who has said to me, “Fear not, I have overcome the world” [John 16:33], causes me to conquer...He comforts and strengthens me in an unbelievable manner. I am more comfortable than the enemies of the gospel. I eat, drink, and sleep better than they do. I have been put in the strongest and gloomiest prison, which itself allows [one] to think...I receive no air or light than through a small opening, through which one throws the filth. I have rough and heavy chains on my hands and feet, which are a continual torment to me. But despite all this, my God does not forsake his promise and comforts my heart and gives me a great contentment.<sup>5</sup>

From his harsh and gloomy prison, with death looming, the soon-to-be martyr wrote to his mother (still a Roman Catholic?).

I have now served Christ already for more than twenty years, and never has he caused me to lack

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 105–7.

anything. Always he has shown me a love far above human understanding... What now? Shall I forsake the Living One in order to hide with the dead? Shall I forsake heaven in order to obtain the earth? Shall I give up the eternal things for the temporal things? Shall I say farewell to the eternal life for the sake of bodily death?...I have more than enough reason greatly to rejoice when I see that my Lord Jesus Christ does me the honor of causing me to sit at his table and to drink from his cup. Is it a little thing to follow such a Lord? He has made the heaven and the earth simply by his mighty word. Before his face angels and archangels cover their faces with their wings and bow before him. Behold, me, an earthen vessel, full of weakness, me, he calls his friend and not merely his servant. O, what an honor! Even the angels he does not grant the honor of suffering for his name. And who am I, that to me this honor is bestowed? Indeed, I am enraptured above heaven when I consider these things. And if this were still not enough, he comforts me without ceasing in my struggle. He is here imprisoned with me. I hear Jesus my Lord. I see him, so to speak, locked up in my fetters and bonds. I see him with the eyes of my spirit locked up in my obscure and dark prison, as he has promised me in his absolutely true word to be with me always to the very end...He is here with me with an innumerable host of angels, comforting and strengthening me, and this very sweet melody of words from his mouth he causes to resound in my ears: "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise

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of [my] God” [Rev. 2:7]. “I know thy trouble and poverty, but thou art rich” [v. 9]. O, what a comfort! My heart leaps within me, when these words sound in my ears. It is no liar, no deceiver, who speaks thus, but it is the Son of God, the mouth without deceit, the infallible truth.<sup>6</sup>

At his sentencing to death, this invincible, glorious man of God and hero of the faith exclaimed for all to hear:

I am exceedingly gladdened and had never supposed that God would give me such honor. I feel that my countenance changes and am joyful on account of the grace that increases in me more and more. I am strengthened from moment to moment...The time of my departure is at hand...It seems to me that my spirit has wings to fly to heaven. There, today, I have been invited to the wedding feast of my Lord, the Son of God.<sup>7</sup>

Philip Schaff remarked that De Bres “met his death as if it were a marriage-feast.”<sup>8</sup> It was.

On May 30, 1567, his Roman Catholic persecutors hanged De Bres for his witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, very much including the witness of the Belgic Confession. He was only forty-five years old. A reliable report has it that, not content with killing De Bres, his haters then burned his body and scattered his ashes in the great river that flows through the southern Lowlands into the sea. No matter! With his dying breath, De Bres was brought in honor in the

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6 Ibid., 107.

7 Ibid., 108.

8 Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 1:504.

soul into heaven to be seated on a throne with the other martyrs, to reign with the exalted Christ (see Rev. 20). As for his ashes, God has his eye on them and preserves them with a view to De Bres' resurrection in the body at the coming of Jesus Christ. In the words of article 37 of his own Confession,

the faithful and elect shall be crowned with glory and honor; and the Son of God will confess their names before God his Father, and his elect angels; all tears shall be wiped from their eyes; and their cause, which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious, will then be known to be the cause of the Son of God. And, for a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive.<sup>9</sup>

The same article of the same confession warns the wicked persecutors of De Bres and his fellow martyrs that those whom they persecuted:

shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked, who most cruelly persecuted, oppressed, and tormented...in this world; and who shall be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences, and, being immortal, shall be tormented in that everlasting fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels.<sup>10</sup>

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9 Ibid., 3:435–36.

10 Ibid., 3:435.

## INTRODUCTION

### THE CONFESSION ITSELF

The Belgic Confession of Faith is one of the creeds, or confessions, of Reformed churches worldwide, along with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt. As a creed, it expresses what the Reformed churches and their members believe to be the teachings of holy scripture, the inspired word of God. As a confession, the creed is the public declaration by these churches and their members of the truths, or doctrines, of holy scripture as these doctrines are known by the Reformed churches and live in the hearts of the members of these churches. The Belgic Confession is an aspect of the conformity of Reformed churches and believers to the spiritual reality taught by the apostle in Romans 10:10: “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”

In order to function as a creed and confession of Reformed churches, the Belgic Confession had to be officially adopted by the Reformed churches at their authoritative gatherings, or synods. This happened soon after the writing of the Confession in 1561.<sup>11</sup> As early as 1566 a national synod of Reformed churches adopted the Belgic Confession as an authoritative statement of the faith of these churches. The international synod of Reformed churches, the Synod of Dordt (1618–19), adopted the Belgic Confession, with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of the Dordt Synod, as the official, binding expression of the faith of holy scripture as known and confessed by

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11 For the names, places, and dates of the early Reformed synods that adopted the Belgic Confession, see Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:505.

the Reformed churches. The Synod of Dordt also adopted a Formula of Subscription, by which the Belgic Confession and the other two creeds are made binding upon all office-bearers in Reformed churches and thus upon the churches themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Even though the members of the Reformed churches do not sign the Formula of Subscription, the implication is that the three creeds are binding also upon them. The members are not at liberty to oppose the creeds or any of their content. They are bound to submit to preaching and teaching that are in harmony with the creeds. They are bound to learn the faith contained in the Belgic Confession as fully as possible. Therefore, all members of Reformed churches are bound to know the Belgic Confession and its teachings. It is the purpose of this commentary on the Belgic Confession that it enables the members of Reformed churches to carry out this sworn, solemn, and bounden duty. Ignorance of their creed by Reformed believers is dereliction of duty, dangerous, and disgraceful.

As the official, authoritative creed of Reformed churches worldwide, how great is the importance of the Belgic Confession! It authoritatively defines the truth of scripture. Explicitly and by implication, it also authoritatively defines heresies. It identifies true churches of Christ

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12 For this Formula of Subscription, see *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 326. The Formula has all officebearers affirm that they are convinced that “all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the [Belgic] Confession...do fully agree with the Word of God”; that they therefore will “diligently...teach and faithfully...defend the aforesaid doctrine, without...contradicting the same, by [their] public preaching or writing”; and that they will “refute and contradict” all errors that militate against the teaching of the Confession, as of the other two creeds.

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in the world. It constitutes the authoritative witness of these churches to other churches and to the world outside the church. On the title (front) page of the original publication of the Confession was a quotation of I Peter 3:15: “Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.”<sup>13</sup> It is a document to instruct the members of Reformed churches in the biblical truth that they profess, especially the children of Reformed believers. It is the guide of Reformed preachers concerning the doctrines they must teach and defend. It is the defense of the Reformed faith against errors by which the faith is threatened, whether by heretics within the churches (always a danger, to all churches) or by the winds of false doctrine blowing upon the true church from without.

By no means the least of the functions of the Confession, with the Catechism and the Canons of Dordt, is its preservation of the unity of the Reformed congregation, of a Reformed denomination, and of whatever ecumenical federation may be a reality. For good reason, the Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt are commonly called the three forms of unity. The unity of the church of Christ is precious, indeed essential, as is the confession of the Nicene Creed, itself one of the confessions of the universal church of Jesus Christ: “I [believe] one Holy Catholic and Apostolic church.”<sup>14</sup> The confession of the church’s unity is based, in part, on Ephesians 4:4: “There is one body.” This oneness is “the unity of the Spirit,” as verse 3 explains. But the Spirit works and

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13 J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandsche Belijdenisgeschriften* [*The Dutch Confessional Documents*] (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij, Holland, 1940), 48–49.

14 Nicene Creed, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:59.

preserves the church's unity by means of agreement in the one, pure doctrine of scripture. Introduction of false doctrine into the church is schismatic, divisive, and destructive of the precious unity of the church. With the Catechism and the Canons, the Belgic Confession is the vigilant, effective guard against schism in the Reformed churches.

Ignorance or disregard of the Belgic Confession by the Reformed churches that formally have the Confession as their creed makes the churches vulnerable to a host of evils that are destructive of the churches, including their unity in the true doctrine of him whom scripture calls the Word of God and the Truth (John 1:1; 14:6). This commentary purposes the living, thorough knowledge of the Confession that not only the church's officebearers, but also all the church's members ought to have.

The Belgic Confession is the statement and brief explanation of all the leading doctrines of the Christian faith in logical order. In this regard, the Confession is unique, and of the greatest significance, among the three creeds that constitute the confessional treasury of the Reformed churches. The Canons of Dordt does not confess all the leading truths of the Christian and Reformed religion. It limits itself to the specific doctrines that were opposed by the Arminian party in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century. These are the truths that ascribe salvation to the sovereign, particular grace of God, the so-called doctrines of grace or the five points of Calvinism.

The Heidelberg Catechism does contain all the leading doctrines of scripture, but not in logical order. Rather, it rather presents and considers the truths of scripture in light of their comfort of the believer. Therefore, the Catechism's

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treatment of many of the doctrines is relatively scanty. It concentrates on the comfort that particular doctrine affords the believer. For example, all that the Catechism says about predestination—certainly a fundamental doctrine of the gospel—is that there is “a chosen communion,” which is saved by the Son of God.<sup>15</sup>

Uniquely among the Reformed creeds, the Belgic Confession sets forth the whole of the Christian and Reformed faith, beginning in articles 1–11 with the doctrine of God as revealed in the inspired scripture and concluding in article 37 with the last judgment. Also, for the most part the Confession’s explanation of the doctrines is more complete than that of the same doctrines by the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Confession is polemical. One implication of the polemical nature of the Confession is that Reformed office-bearers, especially ministers and professors of theology, are required by their signing of the Formula of Subscription also to be polemical in their preaching, teaching, and writing. A polemical ministry on the part of a Reformed minister is not merely the personal style of the man (increasingly viewed as a deplorable weakness), but confessional.

At crucial points in its defense of the faith, the Confession exposes and condemns fundamental errors of the Roman Catholic Church (without ever mentioning that church by name). For example, in article 6, the Confession rejects Rome’s apocryphal books. In article 14, the Confession condemns Rome’s doctrine of “the free will of man.” In article 15, the Confession denies that baptism abolishes original sin. Article 21 denies Rome’s doctrine

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<sup>15</sup> Heidelberg Catechism Q 54, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:325.

that there are “other means” of reconciliation with God than the suffering and death of Christ. Articles 22–24 carry on an extended polemic with Rome’s doctrine of justification by faith *and works*. Article 26 denies that there is any other “advocate” with God, including Mary, than Jesus alone. Article 29 plainly has the Roman Catholic Church in view when it describes “the false church.” When article 35 affirms that in the supper the believer receives the body and blood of Christ “by faith,” it is repudiating Rome’s doctrine that all participants at the supper eat and drink Christ with the physical mouth. Yet even here, where the controversy of the Reformed churches with Rome was the sharpest, the Confession does not name the Church of Rome.

The liveliest, and most explicit, controversy of the Confession is with that strange and troublesome sect known to the reformers, as to the Belgic Confession, as the “Anabaptists.”<sup>16</sup> These were a religious group that broke with the Roman Church during the Reformation but refused to join either the Lutheran or the Reformed churches. The Protestant churches called them Anabaptists because, refusing to recognize infant baptism, they insisted on the necessity of baptizing again, as adults, those who had been baptized as infants. *Anabaptist* means “baptizing again.” In respect of the doctrine that the sacrament of baptism may only be administered to adult believers, they were the ancestors of the contemporary Baptists.

But the original Anabaptists were guilty of more than only the denial of the validity of the baptism of the infants of believers. They were a revolutionary lot. Regarding

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<sup>16</sup> Belgic Confession 36, in *ibid.*, 3:433.

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themselves as the biblical kingdom of God and expecting the return of Jesus Christ at any moment, to establish them as his carnal kingdom on earth (thus showing themselves as millennialists), the Anabaptists despised and rejected all earthly magistracy. They revolted against the civil rulers. With disastrous consequences for themselves! In addition, they were grossly immoral. The leaders were sexually depraved, practicing polygamy, taking other men's wives for themselves as they pleased, and appearing nude in public. They left the distinct impression that the kingdom of Christ was mainly debauchery.

It was of great concern to Guido de Bres that the Belgic Confession differentiate the Reformed churches from the Anabaptists. The tactic of the Roman Catholic enemies of the Reformed churches was to identify the Reformed people as Anabaptist revolutionaries. This, of course, would bring down upon the Reformed churches the fear and fury of the civil magistrates.

Regarding its controversy, the Confession contends more against the Anabaptists than it does against Rome, at least in its explicit references to its ecclesiastical and doctrinal adversaries. The Confession mentions the Anabaptists several times, distinguishing the Reformed churches from them (see art. 18, 34, and 36). Article 36 is at pains both to confess the Reformed belief that submission to the magistrates is "the bounden duty of every one" and strongly to condemn the "Anabaptists" as "seditious people."<sup>17</sup>

This controversy of the Reformed churches with Anabaptism accounts for an intriguing aspect of the early history of the Belgic Confession. Soon after he had written

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<sup>17</sup> Belgic Confession 36, in *ibid.*, 3:433.

the Confession, De Bres threw a copy of the Confession, with an explanatory letter, over the wall of a castle in which the Roman Catholic rulers of the country were living. The result was rage on the part of the rulers, an intense hunt for De Bres in order to kill him, and the flight of the author of the Confession, to escape. But the purpose of the act of throwing a copy of the Confession over the castle wall and into the possession of the civil authorities was not at all to provoke the magistrates. De Bres wanted to assure the civil magistrates that the Reformed churches and believers were not revolutionary Anabaptists, but good citizens of Belgium, who were submissive to the authority of the civil government. It was De Bres' purpose that the rulers read article 36 of the Belgic Confession. At the same time, the Confession would acquaint the rulers with the biblical nature of the Reformed faith. The act was comparable to Luther's "here I stand" at Worms.

The instrument used by Jesus Christ to write the Belgic Confession was Guido de Bres. But De Bres was strongly influenced by John Calvin. During one of his exiles, when fleeing from his persecutors in the Lowlands (what now is Belgium) De Bres studied under Calvin in Switzerland for some two or three years. Also, De Bres benefited from Calvin's *Institutes*. In addition, it is evident that De Bres patterned the Confession after the Gallican Confession, which is also known as the French Confession of Faith (1559) and which was largely the work of Calvin. In the Belgic Confession, therefore, the influence of John Calvin upon Reformed churches is strong.

De Bres wrote the Belgic Confession in 1561 in French. The Confession is the earliest of the three creeds that constitute the three forms of unity of the Reformed churches.

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Within a year of its original composition the Confession was translated into Dutch. A little later, it appeared also in Latin. The English translation found in Schaff's *Creeds of Christendom* is generally regarded as faithful to the French original, and "excellent": "The excellent English version in use in the Reformed Dutch Church of America is made from the Latin text of the Synod of Dort."<sup>18</sup>

The Belgic Confession has authority for the faith of Reformed churches and believers. As soon as 1566, a territorial synod of Reformed churches adopted it as the faithful expression of the doctrine of holy scripture. Several subsequent synods also adopted it as a creed of Reformed churches. The international Synod of Dordt (1618–19) adopted it, with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt, as the authoritative confession of the faith of Reformed churches worldwide and as binding upon officebearers in these churches. This authority is effected by the Formula of Subscription, which officebearers must sign.

Like the other two creeds, the Belgic Confession is binding upon officebearers and churches, not "insofar as" it agrees with the inspired scripture, but "because" it agrees with scripture. The authority of the three creeds is that of the word of God itself, of which word they are the faithful summary and expression.

Not being inspired scripture itself, and therefore not possessing the inherent authority of scripture, the Confession is subject to amendment. The process of such amendment is carefully prescribed in the Formula of Subscription. The process entails the judgment of the church regarding the proposed amendment. No individual,

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<sup>18</sup> Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:507–8.

though a minister of the gospel or a professor of theology, is at liberty to revise or contradict the Confession on his own. By signing the Formula of Subscription, the office-bearer promises never to teach contrary to the creeds, but always to be sure that the content of his preaching and writing is the doctrine of the creeds.

If the truth itself that is the content of the Confession were not enough to make it exceedingly precious in the estimation of Reformed Christians, the bloody history of the creed would serve this end. Within a few years of his writing of the creed, De Bres gave his life, a martyr, on behalf of the creed and its gospel. The Roman Catholic civil rulers, at the behest of the Roman Catholic Church, imprisoned, tortured, and then hanged De Bres for writing the Confession and for preaching the Christian faith that is the content of the Confession.

Soon after De Bres' death, the Roman Catholic emperor, Philip II, unleashed a brutal, barbaric, and bloody persecution upon those in the Lowlands (the Netherlands and Belgium), men, women, and children, who believed, confessed, and worshiped God according to the Belgic Confession. In his great history, John Lothrop Motley states that more than one hundred thousand Reformed Christians died in the persecution that was already ongoing when De Bres wrote the Confession and that intensified soon after De Bres' death. More Reformed Christians were killed in the Netherlands in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century than were killed in all the persecutions of the early church by the Roman empire.

The number of Netherlanders who were burned, strangled, beheaded, or buried alive...for the offences of reading the Scriptures, of looking askance at a

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graven image, or of ridiculing the actual presence of the body and blood of Christ in a wafer, have been placed as high as one hundred thousand by distinguished authorities.<sup>19</sup>

Inasmuch as both De Bres himself and the Netherlands (Lowland) Reformed who died in the persecution that was taking place during De Bres' life and that intensified after his death were killed on account of their confession of the faith embodied in the Belgic Confession, it may truthfully be said that the Belgic Confession has been sealed with the blood of a host of martyrs. If Reformed churches and their members today permit themselves to become ignorant of the Belgic Confession, much more to corrupt the truths of the Confession, they despise the blood of Christ's martyrs—blood shed so that the truth of the word of God confessed in the Belgic Confession might come down to us and our children.

That the Confession is the faithful expression and summary of holy scripture implies that it is never outdated. The Confession does not need continual revision so that its doctrines may remain relevant to contemporary religious belief and life. All clamor that the Belgic Confession is out-of-date and in need of revision is, in reality, a plea for corrupting certain doctrines under the pressure of some current heresy, whether a fallible Bible, evolution, a cross that did not satisfy the justice of God, or salvation conditioned by the will of the sinner. Already in the early seventeenth century, the Arminians in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands contended for a change in article 16 of the

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<sup>19</sup> John Lothrop Motley, *The Rise of the Dutch Republic: A History*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: David McKay, n.d.), 1:122.

Confession, the article on predestination. Their contention for revision was, in fact, opposition to the article's confession of biblical predestination in the interest of their heretical doctrine of salvation by the free will of the sinner.

It is not out of the question, however, that Reformed churches might amend the Confession by making it fuller and clearer regarding certain doctrines. This might be the case with article 37, the Confession's treatment of eschatology, or the doctrine of the last things. The sixteenth century did not see extensive development of eschatology. Also, since the writing of the Confession grievous millennial errors have risen to plague the Reformed faith, against which confessional exposure and condemnation would be helpful. But it is doubtful that Reformed churches in all the world, or even in North America, are doctrinally strong enough to accomplish such amendment. It is a wonder that there are still Reformed churches that hold the Belgic Confession without reservation, the officebearers of which sign the Formula of Subscription without their tongues firmly and obviously in their cheeks.

Regarding the worth of the Belgic Confession, Philip Schaff has judged that the Confession is "the best symbolical statement of the Calvinistic system of doctrine, with the exception of the Westminster Confession."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, 1:506. There are good reasons for the Reformed believer to take exception to Schaff's exception.



## Chapter One

# THE NATURE OF GOD

## (ARTICLE 1)

### *ART. I. THERE IS ONE ONLY GOD.*

*We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God; and that he is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.*

Our Reformed confession begins with God. The very first article expresses our faith concerning God. We open our mouth to utter what lives in our heart, and the first word that comes out is “God.” Not even what we believe about scripture precedes, even though it is through scripture that we know God.

That the Reformed confession begins with God is significant. God *is* first, not merely as though the truth concerning God is then followed by other important topics, but so, that all that follows in the Confession only serves to reveal and magnify God. The one object of faith, according

to the Reformed religion, is God. The sole confession of the Reformed believer is: “God!” The Reformed faith is God centered. Its motto is “*soli Deo gloria*,” that is, “to God alone the glory.” Implied is that to corrupt any article in the Belgic Confession is adversely to touch the truth of God, that is, to bedim the glory of God.

This opening article about God consists of three truths concerning God. The first is the truth of his being: “one only simple and spiritual Being.” The second is the truth of his name: “which we call God.” The third is the truth of his attributes, or better, his perfections: “that he is eternal,” and what follows.

In addition to the truths that are expressed in the article, there is also a truth that is implied: God exists; God lives; God is reality. As Hebrews 11:6 teaches, faith believes “that he is.” How we know this will be explained in the articles that follow, on holy scripture. It is not the case that we believe merely that there is a god—some higher power or supreme being—but rather that God exists—the God who is “one only simple and spiritual Being,” and what follows in article 1.

We do not try to prove this. There is no preliminary article in which we try to prove to unbelievers that there is a god, perhaps by arguing that man has an idea of the greatest of all possible beings in his mind, or that the universe must have a first cause, or that history and creation show design and purpose, or that all peoples worship some deity or other. Proving to unbelievers by rational arguments that God exists cannot be done. This cannot be done because the problem with unbelievers is not their ignorant minds, but their depraved, hard hearts. The problem with the unbeliever is not intellectual, but spiritual.

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The fact is that all men *do* know that God exists. “That which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God” (Rom. 1:18–21). But because they are spiritual fools, they deny the God whom they know to exist and some of whose divine perfections they know also. “The fool hath said in his heart: no God!” (Ps. 14:1; literal translation).

Agnostics and atheists are liars, including the educated agnostics and atheists of contemporary Western society, the learned, degreed liars in the state schools who teach the children and young people the big lie—the biggest lie of which humans can be guilty. The agnostic claims that he does not know whether God exists. The atheist denies the existence of God. Both rebelliously shout into God’s face, “No God!” that is, “We refuse to acknowledge you as God.” It does enter into their denial of God that confessing God would require them to serve God in a holy life. They, however, “are corrupt, they have done abominable works,” and are slavishly committed to their filthy way of life (Ps. 14:1–3).

Scripture itself does not begin by proving the existence of God; rather, it simply confronts the human race with God: “In the beginning God...” (Gen. 1:1).

Confession of God is a matter of faith, not of intellectual ascent to rational evidence, as denial of God is a matter of unbelief, not of lack of intellectual evidence. The truth that confession of God is a matter of faith bears on the theological issue of apologetics, that is, the right defense

of the faith to the unbeliever. One ought not engage the unbeliever in rational, nonbiblical argumentation. No unbeliever can be argued into faith. The believer should witness to the unbeliever on the basis of and in light of the word of God, holy scripture. The opening salvo in the debate is not “Your arguments against God are self-contradictory,” but “You are a guilty sinner exposed to the wrath of God, and Jesus Christ revealed in the Bible is the only way of escape from this wrath,” or “You have no hope in the face of death and judgment; the death and resurrection of Jesus are the reason for my hope, as they are the only hope for humans in the face of the terror of death.”

Good apologetics, therefore, is not the specialty of a few brainy theologians, but the calling and ability of every Christian. The calling to give “an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is you” (1 Pet. 3:15), where “reason” is literally “apology” (referring to a defense of the Christian’s hope), comes to every believer. What is important for a good defense of the faith is not that we give the defense, or engage in this apologetics, with shrewd arguments, but that we boldly give the defense of the Christian hope “with meekness and fear” (v. 15).

It belongs to the existence of God that he is personal. More about this will be said when the doctrine of the Trinity, in articles 8–11, is treated. But already here it is clearly implied that God is a conscious, knowing, willing being, an “I” not an “it.” God is the conscious subject of his existence. According to article 1, “*he*, a personal being, is eternal, incomprehensible,” and so on. Nor can an impersonal substance be “perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.”

The Reformed faith, as the sound confession of the

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Christian faith, rejects pantheism. Pantheism is the belief that God is the universe—all things—or a vague spirit of the universe, but in either case impersonal. It is more accurate to describe pantheism as the notion that the universe is God. This has been the religion of some of the most highly regarded philosophers, for example, Baruch Spinoza. In the form of the notion that God is the vague spirit of the universe, pantheism is a popular religion of the masses in Western society.

This religion manifests itself in the trust of the masses that the evolutionary process, to which they are committed, largely through the educational efforts of the agnostic and atheistic liars who taught them in the state schools, works toward a happy outcome for mankind, as though by the beneficent purpose of a deity—an impersonal, blind deity, but a deity. Or, although committed to sheer materialism, having ruled the Creator out of his creation, nevertheless the masses still pray on occasion of some happy event in their lives or in the face of impending disaster either to thank the spirit or to beseech it to ward off the threat. How ready is the unbeliever in Western society to assure his grieving compatriot, “You are in our prayers.” To what is he praying, if he prays at all? Not to God! Surely, not to the earth, water, atmosphere, and planets of the material universe! But to some vague spirit that is supposed to be abroad in the material universe and that, contrary to the rejection of the personal God by Western society, pays attention to prayers!

Pantheism is idolatry. It is the worship of the universe rather than the worship of the Creator of the universe. Or it is the worship of some vague, impersonal spirit, rather than the worship of the personal God who is a spiritual being.