

The Belgic Confession: A Commentary, (Volume 1), by David J. Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2018. 368 pages. Hardcover. [Reviewed by Nathan J. Langerak]

The author of the Belgic Confession and Reformed pastor, Guido De Bres, wrote the Confession in 1561 in part as an apology for the Reformed faith, seeking to relieve confessors of that faith who were brutally persecuted at that time in the Low Countries, then under Spanish rule. The ruler of the Low Countries, what is today Belgium and the Netherlands, prior to that time was the fanatical Roman Catholic, King Charles V. Despite his fanatical Catholicism, Charles ruled the lowlands with a relatively light hand because the area was economically important to his empire and to a war-hungry and frequently cash-strapped Charles. His son Philip II had no such shrewdness. With the folly of a fanatic, he attempted the destruction of the Reformed faith in the Netherlands and in the end failed to stamp out Protestantism there and lost his possessions.

In the dedicatory epistle to the Confession of Faith Guido De Bres wrote to Philip:

We thank our God that the blood shed by our brethren for our cause and suit, or rather for the cause of Jesus Christ, cries out in witness to the truth. The banishments, prisons, racks, exiles, tortures, and countless other persecutions plainly demonstrate that our desire and conviction [are] not carnal, for we would lead a far easier life if we did not embrace and maintain this doctrine. But having the fear of God before our eyes, and being in dread of the warning of Jesus Christ, who tells us that he shall forsake us before God and his Father if we deny him before men, we suffer our backs to be beaten, our tongues to be cut, our mouths to be gagged, and our whole bodies to be burnt, for we know that he who would follow Christ must take up his cross and deny himself.

The Belgic Confession was the confession of those who were harried and persecuted, and it bears that character in its moving expressions of hope in eternal life, a fact which makes all the more perfidious the willingness of many of their nominal offspring to remain ignorant of, to suffer nothing for, or to forsake the faith of their fathers for which they gave their lives.

Guido De Bres showed no such treachery against the truth, but suffered under the Spanish persecution and showed that the words of his dedication were not blustering bravado but the conviction of his heart out of which he spoke with his mouth. He became a pastor in the lowlands in 1552 and suffered exile in 1556. Shortly after being called to pastor the Reformed congregation in Valenciennes he was captured and imprisoned in April 1567. His crime? Administering the Lord's supper. He was condemned to death and hung along with his fellow minister Peregrin de la Grange a month later. He left behind a wife and five children and a grieving congregation.

The Belgic Confession was sealed with the blood of its author and countless other Reformed Christians in the Low Countries who willingly died for their faith and now reign as butchered saints with Jesus Christ, whose names and numbers only God knows, who now cry out from under the altar of God in heaven, and who will hear Jesus Christ publicly declare in the last day: "Their cause, which [was] condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious[was] the cause of the Son of God" (BC, art. 37). That cause is the cause of the Reformed faith as summarized in the Belgic Confession. Because it is the cause of Jesus Christ, it is worthy of the believer's careful study.

Prof. Engelsma's commentary on the Belgic Confession is a gift to the English-speaking world. There are excellent commentaries in English on the Heidelberg Catechism and the

Canons of Dordt, but to date there is no such substantial commentary on the Belgic Confession. This volume fills that lack. This volume is the first of a planned two-volume series and covers the first twenty one articles of the Confession. The author includes a valuable introduction about the place of the creed in Reformed churches and a brief but stirring account of the life of Guido De Bres and of the value of the Belgic Confession.

Because the Confession is a systematic treatment of all the doctrines of the Reformed faith, the commentary provides the reader with a complete theological education. The commentary is characterized by concision, clarity, and interpretive discipline. Engelsma treats the confession article by article with each chapter in the commentary devoted mainly to the truth contained in one article of the Belgic Confession. Throughout the commentary the language of the Belgic is explained fairly and plainly. This makes the commentary eminently accessible. As a result the lay person will find that he or she is able easily to understand and to delight anew in the truth of the Confession.

Engelsma's love for—and proper intolerance of deviation from—the truth of the Confession comes out clearly. The Confession itself is polemical, and an especially important feature of the commentary is that the truth of the Confession is applied to the errors that afflict the church world—especially the Reformed church world—today, whether they are contemporary errors or long-standing errors mentioned by the Belgic Confession itself.

The entire commentary is a fresh, lively, and thrilling exposition of the Reformed faith, but especially important are the explanations and applications of the Confession's large section on the doctrine of scripture. The Belgic Confession's doctrine of scripture is one of the most complete and thorough in any creed. Here Engelsma gives a moving defense of the Reformed

understanding of scripture as the inspired and infallible word of God. He does so over against the contemporary and faithless wounding of scripture in the houses of its supposed friends, especially by the adoption of the false doctrine of evolution as a legitimate, indeed, *the* legitimate, explanation of the origins of the world. Adoption of this false doctrine necessarily entails the denial of large portions of scripture as the word of God, especially the first few chapters of Genesis. Adoption or toleration of this false doctrine makes vain one's profession of the inspiration of the word of God. That false doctrine will eat like an acid until it eventually dissolves all of scripture as the word of God.

Engelsma's explanation of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in connection with his explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity is a must read. Indeed, his treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity as a whole is exciting and convincing, doing full justice to both the oneness of God and his threeness, especially the unique personal property of each person that makes them distinct, speaks of their relationship with the others, and guards the Trinity from modalism. The Reformed believer will come away with a renewed sense of wonder and love for this fundamental doctrine and the triune God therein revealed.

I heartily recommend this book. It is the mature fruit of a lifetime of theological instruction and reflection. The result is a faithful proclamation of the Reformed faith of the Belgic Confession for the believer today and a stirring call for Reformed believers to hold fast to this confession, believing it with their hearts and confessing it with their mouths.