

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

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Canons of Dordt (1617–'18) and the Belgic Confession (1561) are the confessional basis of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) and all Reformed churches around the world. These three plus the Westminster Confession (1648) are the best known of all the Reformation creeds; among the three that form the confessional foundation of the PRC, the Belgic Confession is the least known and it is almost certainly the least known of all the four creeds that came out of the Protestant Reformation. The Heidelberg Catechism, as was intended, is preached on every Lord's day in Reformed churches. The Canons, while an unbreakable wall of defense against every variation of the deadly heresies of Arminianism and Pelagianism, deals only with doctrines of God's sovereign grace in the salvation of sinners, and those other doctrines related to God's grace in salvation. It deals with the well-known "five points of Calvinism."

Those who overlook the Belgic Confession do themselves a disfavor. It is a sort of "Reformed Dogmatics." It deals with all the doctrines of the church confessed at the time the confession was written, doctrines still relevant to the church today. In the introduction to this commentary we are given a brief biography of the author of the confession and an introduction to the confession itself.

Guido De Bres, the chief author of the confession, was imprisoned by the Roman Catholic authorities and was hanged publically, although he had a wife and children. His sin? Preaching the truth of scripture, a truth hated by the Roman Catholic Church. Already in his

introduction Engelsma tells us of what really was an example of unparalleled courage and love for the truth that led Guido de Bres to write this beautiful confession.

The Protestant Reformed Churches, through the efforts of the Reformed Free Publishing Association, have commentaries on the Heidelberg Catechism (*The Triple Knowledge*) and on the Canons (*The Voice of our Fathers*), but until now, no commentary on the Belgic Confession. It is therefore, a major addition to the library of every Reformed person. This first volume covers articles 1–21 of the Belgic; volume 2 will cover articles 22-37.

The one who writes a commentary on any of the confessions faces two obligations. He must, so to speak, look two different ways. He must look both backward and forward in the history of the church of Jesus Christ: backward to the beginning of the New Testament church at Pentecost and the church of the writer's day, but also forward to the church world of today.

There is good reason why he must look back. Any confession the church adopts is not an isolated and independent confession. Every confession of the truth written and adopted by the church takes up into itself what the church has confessed in the past: Christ's church is one; the body of truth it confesses is one.

Jesus spoke to his disciples of the Spirit he would send to the church, who would guide the church into all truth (John 14–16). As the Spirit performs his work in the church, the truth of scripture develops. God does not reveal the whole body of the truth in one huge bundle at the beginning of the church's history, but he reveals it bit by bit. This means that any new confession that expresses the truth God has revealed through Christ is dependent on what the church has confessed before it since Pentecost.

Thus it has been. The church in earlier times wrote the Nicene Creed, the Creed of Chalcedon, and the so-called *Symbolum Quicumque*, or Athanasian Creed. The Belgic Confession refers to all three of these ancient creeds. Engelsma takes up these great truths of the church of the past in his commentary so that, while the Belgic Confession makes these three creeds its own, the doctrines the Belgic contains are developments of these past confessions.

A commentator on the confession must see where the Belgic Confession fits into that development. He must be able to explain the controversies over doctrine that served as so many goads to prod past theologians to study the scriptures to find there the answers to heresies. He must understand Nicea, Constantinople, Chalcedon (all of which synods wrote or expanded creeds). But he must also show how the Reformation creeds, and particularly the Belgic Confession, is the basis for the doctrines of God's word that are confessed by the church today. The same Spirit that led the church to adopt the *Belgic Confession* is still working today.

Engelsma also examines how this creed explains the doctrines confessed by the church at the time the creed was written. Guido de Bres lived in the immediate post-Reformation era, soon after the great Reformation of the sixteenth century. Such a creed as he wrote must demonstrate that the Reformation was a true liberation from the bondage of Rome, and how such liberation burst with advances in the truth of scripture at the time of the Reformation.

Since the four great creeds of the Reformation are now almost four hundred years old one must also consider the question whether the church today is faithful to its heritage expressed in the old creeds. However, a good commentary on an old creed must not become a "Reformed Dogmatics." It must not be a launching pad for a commentator to write on the later

developments of the Reformation creeds and incorporate those additions into a commentary. It must limit itself to what the creed itself expresses, to explain only that creed. Engelsma is faithful, on the whole, in explaining what the church in the sixteenth century believed as expressed in the Belgic Confession.

But what a commentator must do is examine whether the church today is faithful to her confessions. The answer to that is a sad tale of woe.

After explaining what the Belgic Confession teaches, Engelsma examines whether these confessions—because they serve as a basis of all Reformed and Presbyterian churches—still hold to these confessions and whether they are operative in today’s church world.

Many of these churches, sad to say, no longer are faithful to their confessions, although not many, if any, have actually passed decisions to drop these confessions from their ecclesiastical life. They have apostatized from their creeds by drifting far from the anchor that holds them faithful to the Word of God and ignoring the creeds.

Examples are many. These churches have adopted evolutionism with all its weaknesses and errors when the Belgic emphatically states that God created all things in six days. They have given new meaning of the word “infallible” when applied to the scriptures, and thus have denied this fundamental truth. Time has proven that the confessions accurately express the truth revealed in scripture. Today’s church has abandoned “the old paths” and has found pleasure in finding new paths. They use the excuse that the confessions are outdated and irrelevant—as if the truth of God’s being and works can ever be irrelevant.

Engelsma, an astute theologian and fully aware of all the doctrinal developments since Pentecost till today, shows clearly why contemporary churches no longer represent the truth of

Christ and his cause. They ignore that which they confess to believe in a kind of ecclesiastical hypocrisy. They tuck away the confessions in a section of the church's library where no one can find them as they gather the dust of the ages. Some go so far as to dump these ancient documents on the heap of history, claiming that the truths confessed in bygone years are irrelevant because they no longer contain what our twenty-first century needs to hear. They are really ecclesiastical hypocrites; they claim to hold to the confessions, but in fact they ignore them.

The truth of scripture has indeed undergone further development since the Reformation creeds. But this development does not mean that older doctrines are discarded as outworn statements of the truth that are no longer of any value to the church. Apostate Christianity does exactly that. Their battle cry is: "Away with the past doctrines, careworn and useless to the church today."

Reformed and Presbyterian churches must not forget that the well-trodden paths, what Jeremiah calls "the old paths" (Jeremiah 6:16), are the good paths. The church today stands at the crossroads. It must choose between the new paths or the old paths. The old paths are the "good" paths for they lead to heaven. New paths lead to hell.

If our confessions are to be of any use, a commentary on as old a document as the Belgic Confession must show how most of the churches in our modern age are hopelessly bogged down in the quick sands of the new paths. They despise the old paths and refuse to walk in them and mock those who do.

It is the calling of the church to warn God's people to watch for the old paths, recognize them, and walk in them. But at the same time, those who themselves stand at the crossroads

but understand the perils of new path, must warn their fellow saints of the dangers of new paths, and show the goodness of the old paths, how good it is to walk those same paths the church has walked in through New Testament history.

Polemics is the calling of the church. Ministers promise to engage in polemics when they expose apostate churches. When they are put into office they swear to God they will do this. Engelsma, known for his forceful polemics, has written a book that is of great help to walk the old paths by rejecting the temptation of going down new ones.

To sum up, a commentary must show the reader what the state of theology was at the time it was written. It must tell us why the commentary was written in the first place. And it must tell us why the author of the confession was moved to write it. This commentary does that.

The commentary along with the *Belgic Confession* itself is an ideal book to read in family or personal devotions. It is a good book, perhaps a necessary book. It will stir our blood to give thanks to God for our *Belgic Confession* and it will create a desire to have volume 2.