



## 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.

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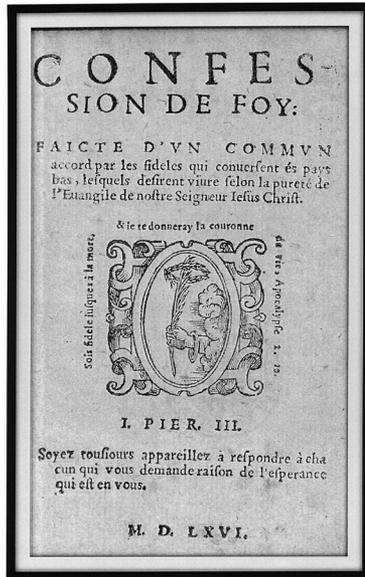
2 Nicolaas H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 69.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

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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

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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.

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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

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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.