



Faith of Our Fathers

Studies in
the Belgic
Confession



Bradd L. Nymeyer
and Al Bezuyen



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Rev. Bradd L. Nymeyer
and Rev. Al Bezuyen

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Rev. Ronald Scheuers
January 2011

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I pray that this material might be used by God for His glory, to train our children in the glorious biblical truths of the Reformation.

In His Service,
Rev. Bradd L. Nymeyer

To my father and mother, Jakob and Berendina Bezuyen, for their instruction in the faith.
Rev. Al Bezuyen

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LESSON 1

An Introduction to the Confession

THE HISTORICAL SITUATION

In 1515 Charles V and his wife Isabella became the rulers of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. With their great desire for power, they built a mighty army and navy to conquer much of Europe, including the Lowlands (which is modern-day Belgium, the Netherlands, and Northern France).

Charles was a ruthless ruler who heavily taxed the people for his own gain. Since the Netherlands was experiencing a time of great prosperity, Charles knew he had to keep them under his control in order to continue receiving some of their wealth.

As part of his vicious rule, Charles demanded that all the people become members of the Roman Catholic Church. He knew the Church taught that the pope spoke on behalf of God Himself. He also knew that the Church would tell its members to obey the king without question. Because the Church commanded it, they would almost certainly obey Charles. This would make it easier for him to hold on to his control of the people. It was a time of great oppression in the European Lowlands.

It was in this time of great discouragement for the people of the Lowlands that the Protestant Reformation began to advance. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses (statements given to encourage discussion) to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. The people in some areas of the Lowlands were open to Luther's ideas about the need for change or reform in the doctrines and practices of the Church. However, the Lutheran teachings didn't take a strong hold in the Netherlands because of Martin Luther's position regarding the Peasants' Revolt in Germany in 1525. Luther sided with the king and thought that the peasants did not have the right to revolt against him. They should have listened to the authorities and lived in peace. This position disturbed the Dutch people, who were tired of their oppressive government.

Also during this time, the teachings of the Anabaptists were spreading. The Anabaptists stressed the importance of personal piety (holiness in lifestyle) as a way to earn salvation. They also taught that only those who professed their faith should be baptized. Therefore, if a person had been baptized as an infant he needed to be re-baptized. (Anabaptist literally means "re-baptized.") The Anabaptists held a simplistic approach to both the Bible and daily living. They called people away from worldly influences and worldly governments. Anabaptists taught that there was no authority on earth except God Himself. This view was in conflict with the Roman Catholic position and that of Charles V. But it was very popular with the people and led many to reject Catholicism for Anabaptism.

In spite of the oppression of the Spanish ruler, the people of the Netherlands were able to promote ideas which the king did not approve. This was due primarily to the invention of the printing press. The demand for books was enormous, especially for books that had been banned by the pope. These books contained Anabaptist teachings and Luther's writings about the need for reform in the Church.

The writings of John Calvin, a reformer who taught in Geneva, Switzerland, were also being printed, read, and embraced by many. The first edition of his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was published in 1536. Calvin taught that when the Bible is properly read, it alone is the guide for knowing God, ourselves, and how to worship God. Calvin emphasized the Bible's teaching that salvation is by grace alone. It is a gift freely given to the people of God's choosing—those who were chosen before the foundation of the world. Based on the Bible, Calvin taught that God sent Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for sin by His death on the cross and resurrection from the grave. Therefore, salvation cannot be earned, but is received by faith alone. This teaching clearly contradicted the Roman Catholic teaching that man had to earn his salvation by fulfilling the requirements set by the Church. Calvin and his followers also opposed the teaching of the Anabaptists.



FOR REVIEW

1. True or False

- a. _____ Charles V was a peaceful ruler who cared for his citizens.
- b. _____ Charles V required all his subjects to become Roman Catholic because of his personal commitment to the Roman Catholic Church.
- c. _____ Martin Luther's teachings didn't take hold in the Lowlands because of his position on the Peasants' Revolt.
- d. _____ John Calvin taught that salvation is a free gift given by God.

2. Place the following events in chronological order:

- a. _____ Martin Luther nailed the ninety-five theses on the church door in Wittenberg.
- b. _____ Charles V became ruler of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire.
- c. _____ The peasants revolted in Germany.
- d. _____ John Calvin's writings began to be published.

3. Which of the following views were not held by John Calvin?

- a. _____ Salvation is by grace alone.
- b. _____ Jesus came to pay the penalty of sin by His death.

- c. _____ **A person baptized as an infant needed to be re-baptized as an adult.**
- d. _____ **The Bible is a guide for knowing God and ourselves.**
- e. _____ **The pope speaks on behalf of God Himself.**

4. List three of the basic beliefs of the Anabaptists.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

5. Why was Calvin's teaching of salvation by grace alone a "reformation" in the Church?

THE AUTHOR

Calvinism quickly gained wide acceptance in the Netherlands. One of those who received and believed the teachings of Calvin was a man named Guido de Bres (pronounced Gweedo de Bray). De Bres was born around A.D. 1522 in Mons, a city in what today is Belgium. He was raised in a Roman Catholic home. Yet at an early age, he embraced the Reformed, biblical teachings of John Calvin. He soon became a leading spokesman in the Reformation, rejecting Roman Catholicism. He and other courageous men brought Calvinism to the Netherlands.

King Charles V saw that the Reformation was a threat to the Roman Catholic Church as well as to his own power. He and the pope responded by carrying out what came to be known as the Inquisition. The Inquisition in the Netherlands was a heresy hunt led by a group of Jesuit priests along with other loyal Roman Catholics. They targeted the Anabaptists and the reformers as heretics. When these "heretics" were caught, they were punished with imprisonment and torture. Charles hoped the Inquisition would break the will of the people so that they would return to the Church of Rome.

To further his cause, Charles V passed a law in 1529 to put to death anyone who insulted images, the virgin Mary, or saints. This meant that, for the rest of his life, Guido de Bres was under the sentence of death. At least three times he evaded arrest. Even after his marriage in 1559, he was forced to flee for his life. Once, while hiding in England, de Bres spent time with other refugees who loved God's Word and the Reformed faith. In England much of his thinking was refined, and the content of the *Belgic Confession* took shape.



FOR REVIEW

6. Fill in the blank.

- a. Guido de Bres was born in the year _____ in the country that we now call _____.
- b. Although born into a Roman Catholic home, he was soon influenced by the writings of _____.
- c. The _____ was a heresy hunt led by Jesuit priests.
- d. The penalty for anyone who insulted images or saints was _____.
- e. After de Bres fled to _____, the content of the *Belgic Confession* began to take shape.

7. The Inquisition used torture to get people to return to the Church of Rome.

Is physical punishment a useful tool in making a spiritual change? _____

Why or why not? _____

THE CONFESSION ITSELF

After returning to the Netherlands, de Bres traveled to a village called Tournai and continued his work. There he wrote pamphlets, articles, and sermons. In 1561 he also wrote the *Belgic Confession*, which was a defense of the Bible and the Christian faith against the teachings of the Roman Catholics and Anabaptists. The *Confession* shows the errors of both heresies and promotes the truth of the Reformed Christian faith. De Bres wrote the *Confession* also to show the state rulers of the Lowlands that the Reformation was based upon biblical teaching. Therefore, he insisted, the Church had no right to persecute faithful, Bible-believing Christians. This history serves as the context for reading the *Belgic Confession*.

The king at the time was Philip II, who began to rule in 1555 after the death of his father Charles V. As the Holy Roman Emperor, Philip was even more fanatic in his Roman Catholicism than his father. One night in 1561, while escaping persecution, de Bres took a copy of the *Belgic Confession* along with an explanatory letter and tossed them over the castle wall at Doornik where the king's leading government officials were staying. In his letter to the king, he urged Philip II to end the persecution of Christians. He also included a prayer for the king.

Delivering the letter and *Confession* did not produce the desired results. It did, however, result in the magistrates placing a bounty on de Bres' head. The search for him became intense, so once more he fled. His house and library were burned to ashes, which led to another exile lasting six years. Christians from the Lowlands, hungering for the truth of the gospel, called for his return. Later he settled in a town in northern France called Valenciennes. While he was there, a rebellion took place which involved the destruction of icons in cathedrals.

These icons were images of people in the Bible and Roman Catholic saints. The magistrates declared the entire town guilty of rebellion and laid the blame particularly on the preachers, including de Bres. While trying to escape, de Bres was caught and thrown into prison. There he wrote many letters in an attempt to console his wife, children, and friends. The Inquisitors repeatedly tried to force him to accept Roman Catholicism and admit his error, but de Bres refused. He was hung on May 30, 1567. His body was burned, and the ashes were thrown into a river.

The *Belgic Confession* was accepted by the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in 1561. After some minor changes, it was adopted by the international Synod of Dortrecht in 1618–1619 as one of the *Three Forms of Unity*, along with the *Canons of Dort* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*. The *Confession* is recognized by the church as a faithful expression of what the Bible teaches.

The *Confession* served as a witness of the Christian faith to the church and the governments of that time. In presenting the basic truths of Scripture, it still serves us well today. It is a witness to the world of what we in the Reformed churches believe. The *Confession* provides a defense of the faith against heresy and a basis for uniting believers. Since it is rooted firmly in the Bible, it continues to call the church to remain faithful to God’s unchanging Word.

FOR MEMORY



1 Peter 3:15–16

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

From the Petitioners in the Address to King Philip II

They would obey the government in all things lawful, but they would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire,” rather than deny the truth expressed in this confession.



FOR REVIEW

8. Against the views of which two groups was the *Belgic Confession* written?

Why? _____

9. To which king did de Bres give the *Confession*? _____

What were the intended results? _____

What were the actual results? _____

10. Fill in the blank.

a. After fleeing for his life, de Bres was killed in the year _____.

b. He was hung and then his body was _____.

c. The *Belgic Confession* was adopted as one of the Three Forms of Unity at the Synod of _____ in the years _____.

d. The truth of the confession is not simply the thoughts of a man, but it is rooted in the Word of _____.

11. The *Belgic Confession* was written in a certain historical context. If you were writing a confession of faith today, what would you include in it and why?

KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

Anabaptists – A group which left the Roman Catholic Church, and stressed the importance of personal piety and the need for believer's baptism.

The Inquisition – A heresy hunt led by Jesuit priests and other loyal Roman Catholics.

The Reformation – A movement in the sixteenth century when the church returned to the basic teachings of Scripture, as opposed to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Synod of Dort – An international meeting of church leaders in the Netherlands in 1618–1619 which adopted the *Three Forms of Unity*.

The Three Forms of Unity – The *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Belgic Confession*, and the *Canons of Dort*.

LESSON 2 (ARTICLE 1)

One God with Many Attributes

VARIOUS VIEWS OF GOD

Psalm 53:1 says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” One of the lessons this Psalm teaches is that God will make Himself known through His judgments and power.

Some people refer to themselves as **atheists** (those who believe there is no God). There are also some who call themselves **agnostics** (those who believe that, even if there is a God, we can have no knowledge of Him). Agnostics claim that, if there is a God out there somewhere, He is too powerful and distant for humans to know Him or have a relationship with Him. In both of these views, God is considered to be irrelevant to our lives. But Romans 1:19–20 oppose these views. They say that God’s creation tells us about God so clearly that everyone knows God exists; no one can honestly say he doesn’t know this. Therefore everyone is without excuse. John Calvin called this knowledge of God the “sense of the divine” that is in every man. This means that God created us with a sure knowledge of Himself. Everyone either suppresses (that is, stifles or holds down) this knowledge of God or embraces it because of the grace of Christ working in him. Atheism and agnosticism are the products of the sinful thinking of men who know deep down that there is a God but refuse to worship Him.

The first words of the *Belgic Confession* are, “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is one . . . God.” When we sincerely confess this truth, we set ourselves apart from all people who reject this confession. With Genesis 1, we confess that, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” There are many religions and a variety of gods, so called, but only the Christian confesses God in the way He has revealed Himself in His Word. This description given for us in God’s Word is summarized in Article 1 of the *Belgic Confession*.

FOR MEMORY

Romans 1:20

For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.





FOR REVIEW

1. What is the difference between an atheist and an agnostic? _____

According to Romans 1:19–20, can anyone truly be an agnostic? _____

Why or why not? _____

2. What is significant about the opening words of the *Belgic Confession*? _____

ONE TRUE GOD

God made a unique claim to Israel long ago when He said, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). The people of Israel had come out of Egypt, a land where the people worshiped the Nile River because they believed it gave life. The sun was worshiped; so was Pharaoh who was thought to be the son of the sun god. God sent the plagues to demonstrate to the Egyptians and the Israelites that the Egyptian gods had no power at all. Other nations had their idol gods as well. However, God was teaching Israel, and us, that there is only one God, and beside Him there is no other.

The *Belgic Confession* summarizes what God reveals about Himself in His Word. We believe that God is only one spiritual being because the Bible says, “The Lord our God is one.” God is God alone. We may not be **polytheists** (those who believe there are many gods). God is not divided into many smaller, inferior gods. Polytheism was the religion of many pagan nations surrounding Israel, and it is still held by many today. The *Belgic Confession* also warns against **pantheism** (the belief that all things are god). According to pantheists, the rocks are god, the trees are god, the animals are god, and the waters are god. Today the New Age movement continues to spread this lie by teaching that all is god and god is in all. Every person, as part of god, is thought to be a god together with the whole universe. Christians, however, confess **monotheism** (the belief that there is one god). This one God, unlike the gods of false religions, made and rules the universe.

We also confess that God is **spiritual**. Because you have a body, you can only be in one place at one time. But God is not physically limited. This means that God has no physical body or any visible form that we can see with our eyes. For this reason, God does not allow us to represent Him by making images “. . . in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below” (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8). God, who is present everywhere, does not permit us to limit Him by making pictures or carvings of Him. He also shows us that it is *impossible* for us to depict Him. When we worship Him we may not reduce the infinite God to a man-made image. We cannot limit the One who is limitless.

Jesus made this point when He said, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

FOR MEMORY



Deuteronomy 6:4

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.



FOR REVIEW

3. Define the following terms:

a. Pantheism _____

b. Polytheism _____

c. Monotheism _____

4. Which of these three views is taught in the *Confession*? _____

5. Name a Bible text that supports this teaching of the *Confession*. _____

6. What do we mean when we say that God is spiritual? _____

What does this mean for our worship? _____

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

After confessing trust in the God of the Bible, Article 1 of the *Confession* lists the **attributes** of God. An attribute is an essential quality of God that He has revealed to us. We say that His attributes are who He is. Therefore, God is not simply described as eternal or immutable, but He *is* "eternal . . . immutable . . . almighty . . ." altogether and at all times. To lose sight of even one of these attributes is to diminish God and to diminish our knowledge of Him.

God's attributes can be divided into two categories. The first category consists of those called "incommunicable" attributes. These include those attributes of God that none of His creatures possess. For example, God is eternal. In contrast, every creature on earth dies.

These incommunicable attributes of God have no equivalent in mankind. Only God is eternal, infinite, and all-powerful.

The other category consists of God's "communicable" attributes. These are His attributes found in some way in mankind, such as wisdom and knowledge. An older man may be wise, but that does not mean he has the perfect wisdom of God. Knowing the attributes of God helps us know, worship, and love God as He reveals Himself in His Word.

Article 1 draws our attention to God. By faith, we believe with our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a God. He tells us exactly who He is. Like Genesis 1:1, the *Confession* does not begin with proof of God's existence. The church accepts the truth of God's existence on the basis of a faith rooted in God's Word. We could attempt to prove the existence of God. His works are evident everywhere in the creation. Those who, by God's grace (Ephesians 2:8), believe, see His works and give Him praise. But if one does not have the eyes of faith, no amount of evidence will convince him to acknowledge God. The fact that Christians believe and confess this God is a gift from Him. He works in us by His Word and Spirit, enabling us to express our faith in Him. The *Belgic Confession* is therefore a Christian's confession since only a Christian, by faith, can profess it!

FOR FURTHER STUDY

For more on the attributes of God, see *Summary of Christian Doctrine* by Louis Berkhof, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

FOR MEMORY



Belgic Confession, Article 1

We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God.

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter II, 1

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions.



FOR REVIEW

7. Define the following terms:

a. Attribute _____

b. Incommunicable attributes _____

c. Communicable attributes _____

8. Classify each of the following attributes of God listed in Article 1 as incommunicable (I) or communicable (C).

- a. _____ Eternal
- b. _____ Almighty
- c. _____ Just
- d. _____ Invisible
- e. _____ Good
- f. _____ Incomprehensible (God cannot be fully understood)
- g. _____ Perfectly Wise
- h. _____ Infinite (God is absolutely without limits)
- i. _____ Immutable (God does not change)

9. Using the letters before the attributes listed in Question 8, tell which attribute each of the following texts describes.

- a. _____ Psalm 90:2
- b. _____ Psalm 104:24
- c. _____ Psalm 139:7–10
- d. _____ Psalm 145:3
- e. _____ Psalm 147:5
- f. _____ Isaiah 40:12
- g. _____ Isaiah 40:13–14
- h. _____ Malachi 3:6
- i. _____ Mark 10:18
- j. _____ Romans 11:33
- k. _____ 1 Timothy 6:16
- l. _____ James 1:17
- m. _____ Revelation 16:5

10. We confess by faith that we believe in God. Should we try to prove the existence of God?

Why or why not? _____

What would you tell a friend who does not believe the biblical teaching about God's attributes?

KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

Atheism – The belief that there is no God (from the Greek: "a" meaning "no," and "theos" meaning "God," therefore, the belief that there is no God).

Agnostics – Agnostics claim that, if there is a God out there somewhere, we cannot know Him (from the Greek: "a" meaning "no," and "gnosis" meaning "knowledge," therefore, the belief that if there is a God we can have no knowledge of Him).

Polytheism – The belief that that there are many gods (from the Greek: "poly" meaning "many," and "theos" meaning "God," therefore, the belief that there are many gods).

Pantheism – The belief that everything is God (from the Greek: "pan" meaning "all," and "theos" meaning "God," therefore, the belief that all things are God).

Monotheism – The belief that there is one God (from the Greek: "mono" meaning "one," and "theos" meaning "God," therefore, the belief that there is one God).

Attribute of God – An essential quality of God revealed to man.

Incommunicable Attribute – An attribute found only in God.

Communicable Attribute – An attribute found in God and reflected in man.

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