

The Story of Guido de Bres: Author of the Belgic Confession

Today the truth so beautifully expressed in the Reformed Confessions which we hold so dear is under attack. Men who profess themselves to be wise sit in their comfortable studies and write in ways so as to subtly discredit the place that those Confessions have in our lives. In his book, which was issued as a text for a religion course I recently took at Calvin College, Dr. Donald McKim writes: “Social, cultural, and political assumptions are inevitably expressed in confessional writings. All are historically conditioned, even the great, classical statements of Christian belief.”^[14] Though Dr. McKim claims earlier in his book that the Confessions have authority over the lives of Christians, in the above statement he essentially strips that authority by claiming that those Confessions are in some respects relative to the particular context in which they were produced. Once this kind of ground work is laid, the “brick wall of the truth”^[15] which defends us from our enemies can be easily disassembled as the Devil sees fit. If the power of the truth set forth in the Belgic Confession and the other Reformed creeds, which is derived from the Holy Scriptures, is limited to certain people who lived at a certain time, then our defense will crumble when our day of tribulation arrives. While it is not my purpose in this article to construct an argument that defends our beloved Confessions from such attacks, I do hope briefly to recount the story of the author of the Belgic Confession, Guido de Bres, whose life testified to the power of the words he wrote not only for the church in his day, but in our day as well.

Guido de Bres was the fourth child born in a family of glass painters in the city of Mons, Belgium in the year 1522. He spent his teenage years and early twenties learning the family trade while the Reformation began to swirl around him. At some point in these earlier years Guido got hold of a Bible which he proceeded to read with great interest as he had heard stories of the fuss raised by Reformation leaders. He must have wondered why these men and women refused to recant their views, choosing rather to hold to their convictions to the point of death such as the English Bible translator William Tyndale in 1536. Most readers of this magazine likely have a Bible on their shelf or in their drawer, but in this place at this time owning a Bible was a serious crime in the eyes of the state as it was forbidden by the pope. In spite of the threat of death, however, Guido decided to satisfy his curiosity by studying the Word, through which study the Spirit led him to be converted to the Reformed faith.

From this point on, with the exception of periods of study in England and Switzerland, the life of Guido de Bres was under almost constant threat of death. All of the territory included in the modern day countries of Belgium and the Netherlands, then referred to

as the Lowlands, were at this time under the authority of Charles V, the same great ruler who had presided over the Diet of Worms when Martin Luther made his famous stand in 1521. Charles V was no friend of the Reformation, the result being that persecution was a regular occurrence in Mons. Fearing for his well-being and even his life Guido fled to England in 1548 where king Edward VI reigned.

Edward was just a young boy throughout his reign, and a sickly one at that. By the providence of God the lack of a strong ruler in England at this time made it a safe haven for Reformed believers. In fact, the Reformation flourished under the spiritual leadership of men like Thomas Cranmer, who was a generally sound Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury. Throughout the four years of his stay in England, Guido had ample opportunity to study the Scriptures and grow in the Word.

While Guido was studying in England, Charles V began lightening the load of persecution borne by Reformed Christians in the Lowlands with the hope of making peace in his kingdom. He had plans to step down from his throne, and he wanted leadership to pass to his son Phillip II smoothly. Guido heard that persecution was not so severe as when he had left, and so he returned to Belgium in 1552.

Guido dearly loved his home country, as evidenced by the amount of time he spent preaching the truth of the Gospel there in spite of his life being under threat. Having grown in his knowledge of the truth in England, he began to labor in the city of Lille with a congregation which was known as the Church of the Rose. As it turned out, however, the peace created by Charles V was not to last. Charles had not been a friend of the Reformation, but Phillip was bent on its total destruction. In 1556 he renewed the policies of his father that made it death to own a Bible or speak about the Reformation. These policies allowed men to tattle on their Reformed neighbors to the authorities and then collect a portion of the estate of the convicted. Besides simply renewing the old policies, Phillip II highly systematized the rounding up of Reformation followers for torture and death, putting his half sister Margaret into a new position of authority which presided over exactly that task.

Guido's Church of the Rose in Lille suffered the martyrdom of a blacksmith along with his wife and two sons. Perhaps Guido had this event in mind when several years later he wrote in the Belgic Confession concerning the providence of God "that He orders and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even then when devils and wicked men act unjustly."^[16] God uses the means of wicked men to strengthen his church through persecution, of which knowledge Guido had personal experience.

Following the death of the blacksmith and his family, Guido led his congregation away from Lille to the city of Frankfurt, Germany which was outside of Phillip's

clutches. It was in Frankfurt that two great men of God met each other, Guido de Bres and John Calvin.

From Frankfurt, Guido traveled to Switzerland (some suggest that this trip was per Calvin's recommendation) to continue his studies. He spent two years studying the original languages of Scripture at the Academy in Lausanne, where Theodore Beza was his instructor. From Lausanne he traveled to Geneva, where he continued to study for another year. These three years of study better prepared Guido for the ministry. No doubt the preaching and teaching of Calvin greatly influence Guido's theology, which he would soon be writing down in the Confession. Yet despite these years of peace and study, Guido itched to be back in the active ministry, and so he traveled to the city of Doornik, Belgium in 1559 where he became the minister in a congregation which called themselves the Church of the Palm.

Some of the most significant events in the life of Guido de Bres occurred in the city of Doornik. First of all, he was married to a godly woman in the congregation by the name of Catherine Ramon. It was quite a sacrifice for Catherine to marry a man who was wanted by the state because of his love for the truth. Young ladies and young men can take a lesson from this godly marriage of Guido and Catherine, that no matter what earthly circumstance your marriage may put you in, your primary criterion ought to be for your spouse to be in the Lord. It would be better to remain single than to marry a man or woman who loves not the Lord. God blesses good choices made by his children, just as he blessed Guido and Catherine with several children and a very deep love for each other.

At the beginning of his marriage to Catherine and ministry in Doornik, Guido wrote the Belgic Confession. By this time he had grown much not only in his knowledge of the Word by way of study, but in his experience in the ministry. He knew what it meant to be hated because he was a child of God. Yet he continued to labor for the Lord, and the Church of the Palm grew as a result of God's work through his hand.

The Devil, however, was not content to sit back and let the Gospel progress too far in Doornik. A man in the church by the name of Robert Du Four began to stir up trouble. Though Guido was against it, Du Four wanted to seek public recognition from the state by demonstrating the strength of Protestantism in Doornik, so in the year 1561 he led some five-hundred Protestants out into the night to publicly sing Psalms in the street. While this action certainly grabbed the attention of the magistrates, it far from achieved Du Four's vain hope of gaining free worship for Protestants in Doornik. It rather led to mass arrests throughout the city and the Church of the Palm was labeled with the Anabaptists as a rebellious group. Although the pastor of the church was sought for, Guido stayed hidden within the walls of the city for a time before escaping with his wife and child.

Before his departure, however, Guido threw a completed copy of the Belgic Confession along with a handwritten appeal to the magistrates over the walls of the castle at Doornik. His hope was that the officials would see that Protestants such as the Church of the Palm were not rebels. That Guido highly respected the authority of the state is clear enough in the Confession where he wrote that “it is the bounden duty of every one, of what state, quality, or condition soever he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates.”^[17] If the leaders at Doornik had had any love in their hearts they would have seen the truth in Guido’s appeal. Lovers of Jesus Christ make great citizens. The Belgic Confession only spurred them on to greater hatred, however, and the hunt for Guido became more intense. Let us remember, however, to be subject to the law, whether it acts justly or unjustly to us, for it is a privilege to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ.

After his escape from Doornik, Guido found his way across the border to France in an area where persecution was not so severe. Here he traveled among several different congregations preaching the word. He and Catherine had several children during this time, which must have been a great joy to them. However, the time spent with his children was soon to be cut short.

Several calls for pastoral aid ignited in Guido the desire to return to his homeland once more. A series of events landed him in the city of Valenciennes, near the border of France and Belgium, laboring among the Church of the Eagle in 1566. For several years the fiery preaching of one Peregrin de la Grange had caused a great response for the cause of the Reformation in Valenciennes. Thousands gathered openly in fields to hear the preaching. Guido’s presence strengthened the resolve of the Protestant faction in the city, and though Guido was not in support of it, trouble broke out as they began defacing Roman Catholic Cathedrals and knocking the heads off statues of the saints. King Phillip’s regent Margaret was forced to grant religious freedom to the people of Valenciennes. The joy over this seeming victory was short lived, however, because Phillip was outraged and decided to send reinforcements to take back the city, which he successfully did on Palm Sunday, March 23, 1567.

Guido was originally able to escape the city, however he was captured en route to France and sent to prison in the castle in Doornik, the same building to which he had delivered the Belgic Confession six years earlier. From the castle prison in Doornik he was transferred back to Valenciennes to await trial and execution in the worst prison imaginable. Known as the “Black Hole,” it was a small dark room in which the only featured light came from a hole which allowed human excrement to pass from other cells in the prison. In spite of these wretched conditions Guido wrote a lengthy tract on the Lord’s Supper and several letters including one to his poor wife, who was never to see her beloved husband again until her own departure from this valley of tears. On May 31, 1567 Guido de Bres was publicly hanged because he relied on

Jesus Christ for his salvation from sin and desired the same salvation for those he preached and wrote to.

Far from lessening the power and authority of the Belgic Confession by making it relative to a certain context, the life of its author Guido de Bres adds weight to its meaning. When we learn about the hardships suffered by this man of God for the sake of the truth that he recorded for us by the guidance of the Spirit of that truth we ought to be spurred on to a greater love for our Savior. Let the affliction come! It is a privilege to suffer for Christ. What great comfort we have in the words Guido wrote in his final article in the Confession concerning the Christian's consideration of the final judgment, namely that it is "most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and the elect; because their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labor and trouble which they have borne."^[18] May God give us grace to bear the reproach of men for the sake of our love for our Lord.

Recommended Reading

If this history of a persecuted man that God used for many great things in the church caught your interest, then you would greatly enjoy the book *Glorious Heretic: The Story of Guido de Bres* by Thea B. Halsema. I used this book to obtain most of the information I presented in the article.