

The Belgic Lightning Bolt

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Great events in the history of the church are bolts of lightning from heaven. But they do not strike out of a clear, blue sky on a sunny day. They flash from storm clouds and are forecast by a darkening day.

Such was the case with the writing, and adoption as a Reformed creed, of the Belgic Confession of Faith. It was a lightning bolt of truth from heaven, accompanied by a peal of the thunder of judgment that shook the false church to its foundation and resounded throughout the entire, then-known world. The reverberations of the thunder of judgment are heard and felt still today in North America, Europe, South Africa, and other places wherever churches that are Reformed in name and that once were sound, and probably still have the Belgic Confession as their creed formally, have fallen away from the Reformed faith of the creed.

Out of skies that had been darkening for years and that were filled with ominous thunderheads flashed the lightning bolt that is the Belgic Confession.

As its name indicates, the Belgic, or Netherlands, Confession was written in that part of Europe that is now called Belgium. In those days, Belgium and the Netherlands were one country. The country was known simply as the “Lowlands,” or “Netherlands.” Soon after the Belgic Confession was written, the Lowlands became two distinct nations, Belgium and the Netherlands. Despite the Belgic Confession, and mainly due to fierce persecution of the Reformed churches and believers, Belgium remained overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. The Netherlands, to the north, was chiefly Protestant and Reformed. In the Netherlands, the Belgic Confession was honored, indeed officially adopted as the creed of the churches.

Indicating the force and extent of the great apostasy of these last days, the vast majority of Reformed churches in the Netherlands today openly criticize and reject the Belgic Confession and the truths of the gospel that it teaches. Of the few others that still profess to maintain the Confession, some fail vehemently to defend the creed and its doctrines.

In the years leading up to the writing of the Belgic Confession, the Lowlands was Roman Catholic in religion. The rulers were Roman Catholic. The Spanish empire dominated. Spain was vehemently and viciously Roman Catholic. The large nation of France, which bordered the Lowlands and exercised powerful influence upon the Lowlands was Roman Catholic. All Roman Catholic governments persecuted the Protestants, especially the Reformed Protestants. Reformed churches were outlawed. Reformed preachers were jailed, tortured, and killed. Cities populated by the Reformed were razed. The great history of the Netherlands by John Lothrop Motley estimates that the number of Protestants in the Netherlands who were killed at that time by the Roman Catholic powers were some 100, 000—men, women, and children.

This history of persecution confronts each of us with the question, “Do I honor and love the Belgic Confession *so*, that I would shed my life’s blood for my confession of it?” This is to ask whether we truly honor and love the gospel of grace.

In this historical setting, God caused the writing of the Belgic Confession. Out of such storm clouds, the lightning of the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ flashed.

It pleased God then, as always throughout the history of the church, to flash his bolt by means of a man, fundamentally by *one* man (which is also God’s usual way). The man was Guido de Bres (pronounced: Geedo de Bray). He was one of the truly great men of God in the history of the church. He ranks with Luther and Calvin—a German, a Frenchman, and a

Netherlander. de Bres was the son of ardent Roman Catholics in what is now Belgium. God converted him from the Roman Catholicism in which he was reared by the reading of the Bible and the reading of Reformed books and pamphlets that were being distributed throughout Europe (contrary to the edicts of the authorities, who would kill the pamphleteers if they would catch them).

This aspect of the history of the Belgic Confession ought to encourage the *Beacon Lights* and the RFPA to be zealous in writing and spreading abroad their publications, as also to be distinctive and antithetical in the content of the writings. de Bres was not won to the Reformed faith by writings that downplayed the difference with Rome and that were compromised by a desire for ecumenical relations with the false church. In those days, the faithful defenders of the faith were polemical, that is, fighting, contenders for the faith. The lightning bolt of truth was not a piddling discharge, but a glorious, even awesome, flash.

Called and qualified by the Spirit of truth in a special way (that time was an extraordinary coming of the kingdom of God), de Bres began preaching the gospel of grace as confessed by the Reformed faith. Immediately, he became the object of the hatred of the Roman authorities, who determined to murder this man of God. More than once, he had to flee his home and homeland to escape his foes. On one occasion, his persecutors burned de Bres' home and library (his *library!*), and de Bres himself in effigy, he barely escaping with his life. He spent about two years with Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland. During this time, he studied under Prof. Calvin in a kind of seminary training. This helped de Bres become a better preacher. It would serve also to prepare de Bres to express the Reformed faith in the Belgic Confession. In the Belgic Confession, we owe much, indirectly, to John Calvin.

Again and again, at the risk of his life, de Bres would return to the Lowlands, to preach to thousands who had been converted to Reformed Christianity and who wanted, more than anything else, Reformed preaching.

On one of his stays in Belgium, in 1561, de Bres wrote the Confession. He wrote it in French. Almost at once, it was translated into Dutch. Soon thereafter, it was translated into German. Later, it was also translated into Latin, the language of the theologians of the world. Thus, the creed spread over all the world and among all Christian churches. An English translation was published in 1689. This is basically the translation used in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

A Reformed synod adopted the Confession as the official creed of Reformed Christianity in the Lowlands as early as 1566. The international synod of Dordt (1618–1619) made it the authoritative creed of Reformed churches worldwide. It is today one of the three confessions of the faith of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as also of other Reformed churches, worldwide. Every officebearer is bound by it. Every member should know it, learn from it, and confess the truths contained in it. The Reformed churches recognize the Belgic Confession as the work of the Spirit of truth in a special way, the way of guiding the church into all truth (John 16:13).

A response to this special issue of the *Beacon Lights* ought to be that every young person *reads* the Belgic Confession. Let him or her keep in mind as he or she reads that the Confession was written in blood.

Not long after writing the Belgic Confession, in 1567, de Bres was captured, tortured, and killed by the Roman Catholic enemies of himself and of the gospel that de Bres confessed. He was only 45. He left behind a young widow (to whom he could be married for only seven years

and whom he warned beforehand of the likelihood of his martyrdom at a young age when they married) and five young orphans. His letters from prison to his soon-to-be-widowed young wife and to his mother, just before his death, at first moves even the most stoical reader to tears and then lifts his soul up to the portal of heaven. I have translated the letters into English in the first volume of my commentary on the Confession.

The heavens were dark with storm clouds when the Belgic Confession was written.

From these clouds, the lightning bolt of truth flashed brightly.

The Belgic bolt flashes still today in those Reformed churches that have the Belgic Confession as their creed—and that faithfully confess and teach it.

Still in a darkening day, out of ominous storm clouds.

And still accompanied by the frightening roar of the thunder of judgment.

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