

“PROFESSION OF OUR REFORMED FAITH.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Sermon Texts: Hebrews 10:32-36; 11:1-3a; 11:35-40

Introduction.

Last week I spoke about confessions of faith in general and about the purpose and benefit of making creeds and confessions. Our standards of unity give us both a *standard*, a foundation, a measure, something to teach and pass on; and they give us *unity*, a flag to rally around, a banner to carry, this is what we believe.

This evening I want to get more specific about the making of a Reformed Confession and give you the background, history and authorship of the Belgic Confession, the first and oldest of our three standards of unity that form the doctrinal foundation for all the Reformed churches with roots in the Netherlands.

Hebrews 10 and 11.

If you are reading through the OT using the Bible Reading Plan we put in your boxes at the beginning of the year you can't help but be aware of how God is the Lord of history and how His unseen, invisible hand is guiding all the events and all the people. Even the bad things and the sinful things fall under His providential control and work out according to His exact purposes.

All of human history is truly “His story.” All history is God's ongoing story of redemption and salvation. History is filled with God and therefore all of human history is significant and meaningful. There is a purpose for everything and everything is leading to a purposeful end.

You see it in Adam and God's promise to redeem by crushing the head of the serpent. You see it in Abraham when God promises to bless all nations through Abraham's seed. You see it in the life of Joseph and how all bad and negative things work for a much greater good and purpose.

The writer of the book of Hebrews is writing to a group of Christians who are being afflicted and persecuted. He's encouraging them to endeavor to preserve and to walk by faith with an eye to the eternal joy that is set before them. As the Lord of history God can make promises about the future and then control all the events that lead up to fulfilling that future. He exhorts them:

Hebrews 10:35-36 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

The Reformation.

In the providence of God He sovereignly brought together a perfect storm of events and people that became the great reformation of the Church of Jesus Christ at the beginning of the 16th century in Europe.

It was a time of great spiritual turmoil and change in Europe. New wine was being poured into an old wine skin and it burst in the 16th century. The Protestant Reformation was a reform, not a new beginning.

At the beginning of the 16th century there was only one church over all of Western Europe. It was sometimes referred to the Holy Roman Empire. Over a period of several hundred years this church based in the Vatican in Rome became very rich and powerful and as is often the case money and power corrupt people. What was true about the Roman church in the 16th century can be said about parts of the protestant church in the 21st century. Just look at what money and power did to the Crystal Cathedral and the Schuller family.

For several hundred years leading up to the Reformation there was a long slow decay and decline in the Roman Catholic Church. There were terrible abuses of power and authority. The church in the early centuries had been governed by councils, a kind of general assembly of bishops and priests who would decide points of doctrine and administration. The papacy became a mix of politics and corruption.

A number of popes were immoral and a number of doctrines were allowed to creep into the church that were unbiblical and heretical. God's truth became covered up by man's ideas and idolatry. Justification by faith became justification by works.

The Mass would become another major issue. In the 13th century transubstantiation had become dogma. The priest through his ordination had the power to change the host into the very flesh and blood of Christ while the appearances of the bread and wine remained.

There was no direct access to Bibles, they were only in Latin and only in the hands of the priests. There was no direct access to God and forgiveness, one had to go through a labyrinth of oral confession and penance.

John Gutenberg's movable type printing press in 1455 in Mainz, Germany did for the gospel in the 16th century what the Roman peace and system of roads had done for the gospel in the 1st through 3rd centuries. The invention of the printing press made it possible for the first time for the common man to have a copy of the Bible and then to have it in their own common language.

Then came the last straw. Pope Leo X was trying to finish the building St. Peters in Rome through a godless fundraising campaign of selling indulgences to lessen loved ones time in purgatory. A Dominican by the name of John Tetzel was selling them in Wittenberg where a young monk by the name of Martin Luther lived.

The birth date of the Reformation is always given at October 31, 1517 when that young monk, Martin Luther, nailed 95 theses or points of theological discussion to the door of the Wittenburg Church in Germany.

Then quickly after Luther came John Calvin, a brilliant young lawyer who powerfully and persuasively articulated the truth of Scripture and the teachings of Paul concerning justification by faith alone through grace alone.

Many other social, economic, political and religious events came together to give birth to the greatest and most far reaching spiritual revival in human history. From 1517 to 1564, in this very short span of time we witness significant change through the labors of just a few men.

"Where else does history show a transformation so rapid, so surprising, and so permanent?"
(McNeill, *Calvinism*, p. 3)

Netherlands.

In 1515 Charles I began his rule as King of Spain and in 1521 he became Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. He sought to consolidate power and a key part of that was getting better control of the diverse provinces of the Netherlands which included Holland, Friesland, Belgium, Luxemburg and parts of Northern France.

In 1522 he started the Inquisition with the blessing of Pope Adrian VI, to purge the Netherlands of all anti-Roman Catholic groups, including all those speaking out against the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. Anyone who spoke against the Roman Catholic beliefs or who spoke a good word about those who did or who failed to report such persons was executed.

From 1522 to 1555 over 2,000 non-Catholics in the Netherlands were burned at the stake for heresy. But despite the persecutions the evangelical and Reformed message flourished driven in part by the flood of books and articles flowing from printing presses all over Europe. Charles V's finger in the dyke couldn't hold it back.

When Charles V died, the Netherlands came under the rule of his son Philip II who was more zealous and ruthless than his father. Under his reign more than one hundred thousand Protestants were martyred in the Netherlands.

Listen to just one brief description which reads like Hebrews 10 and 11:

"The barbarities committed amid the sack and ruin of those blazing and starving cities are almost beyond belief; unborn infants were torn from the living bodies of their mothers; women and children were violated by the thousands; and whole populations burned and hacked to pieces by soldiers in every mode which cruelty, in its wanton ingenuity, could devise" (See J.I. Motley, *Rise of the Dutch Republic*, vol. II. 504).

As has always been the case in history, despite the horrible persecution which was especially focused on the Protestants in the Netherlands, the Reformed faith flourished and produced some of the richest and most Biblical professions of faith.

Guido de Bres.

Five years after Martin Luther's attempt at having a discussion about some points of doctrine and about the shameful practice of indulgences and the same year Charles V started the Inquisition in 1522 a painter of stained glass in the city of Mons in southern Belgium, Jean de Bres and his wife gave birth to a son, Guido de Bres (sometimes Guy de Bray). He was the fourth son of devout Roman Catholic parents who raised him in that faith.

His mother had prayed fervently that this son would be used of God in a significant way in ministry. God heard and answered her prayer but in a way far different than she ever imagined.

In the 1540's John Calvin was training and sending out young preachers into the French speaking areas of southern Netherlands and de Bres heard those preachers. In 1547 two young

Reformed and evangelical preachers and their wives spent some time in Mons. Soon after they left they were arrested and burned alive at the stake for their Protestant faith. That event showed the people of Mons the cost of being faithful to Scripture and the Reformed church flourished.

With the visible growth came persecution and in 1547 Guido de Bres didn't give up his newfound faith, but instead fled to England until 1552 where he trained, studied theology and came under the influence of several leading reformers also in exile there.

When the Roman Catholic Queen Mary rose to power in England in 1552 many of the reformers fled back to the continent as did de Bres, who began pastoring a church near Mons.

In 1556 de Bres was forced to flee again this time to Frankfurt where he met John Calvin and then went to Geneva to study with Calvin for a season. De Bres called Calvin his spiritual father.

In 1559 de Bres returned to the Netherlands where he pastored underground churches often house to house. That same year he also married Catharine Ramon with whom he had five children. It was during this time that in 1561 he drafted the first edition of the Belgic Confession in French.

Yet again persecutions caused him to flee, once again abandoning all his possessions and traveled town to town for five years. Remember the words of Hebrews:

“You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (Hebrews 10:34). There are still people like that in our world who walk by faith and trust the future entirely to God.

In 1566 he returned to his native country. As result of de Bres' work half the town became Reformed which attracted more persecution. As the Reformation spread the people grew bolder and their numbers made it hard to stay in secret. Crowds as large as 25,000 came to hear de Bres and others preach. They starting demanding church buildings for their worship services.

The city was besieged and conquered by the Spanish. On April 11, 1567 Guido de Bres has finally found and imprisoned. He continued to write from prison. Here is one especially excellent letter written in response to a woman who worried about him and didn't know how he could possibly eat or sleep without fear.

“My lady, the worthy cause that I uphold and the good conscience which my God has given to me, permits me to sleep, to eat, and to drink better than those who wish me here. And as for my chains and my bonds, rather than frightening me and filling me with horror, on the contrary they are my delight and my glory, and I count them more precious than chains of gold, for they are more profitable to me, and when I hear the sound of my chains, it seems that I hear the sound of sweet music in my ears, not that it comes naturally from these bonds, but from the cause for which I am held, which is the holy word of God” (quoted from Daniel Hyde, *With Heart and Mouth*, p. 19).

A few days later he wrote his last letter to his wife to comfort her:

“Catherine Ramon, my dear and beloved wife and sister in our Lord Jesus Christ: your anguish and sadness disturbs somewhat my joy and the happiness of my heart, so I am writing this for the

consolation of both of us, and especially for your consolation, since you have always loved me with an ardent affection, and because it pleases the Lord to separate us from each other...

“Now remember that I did not fall into the hands of my enemies by mere chance, but through the providence of my God who controls and governs all things, the least as well as the greatest...

“How then can harm come to me without the command and providence of God? ...

“It is very true that human reason rebels against this doctrine and resists it as much as possible and I have very strongly experienced this myself. When I was arrested, I would say to myself, "So many of us should not have traveled together. We were betrayed by this one or that one. We ought not to have been arrested." With such thoughts I became overwhelmed, until my spirits were raised by meditation on the providence of God...

“And I pray you, my dear and faithful companion, to join me in thanking God for what he has done. For he does nothing that is not just and very equitable, and you should believe that it is for my good and for my peace. You have seen and felt my labors, cross, persecutions, and afflictions which I have endured, and have even had a part in them when you accompanied me in my travels during the time of my exile. Now my God has extended his hand to receive me into his blessed kingdom. I shall see it before you and when it shall please the Lord, you will follow me. This separation is not for all time. The Lord will receive you also to join us together again in our head, Jesus Christ.

On May 31, 1567 he has hung along with another pastor. Before being lead out to death he spoke these words to his fellow prisoners:

“My brothers, I am condemned to death today for the doctrine of the son of God, praise be to Him. I would never have thought that God would have given me such an honor” (quoted from Daniel Hyde, *With Heart and Mouth*, p. 19). Another saint of whom the world is not worthy.

The Belgic Confession.

The Belgic Confession was birthed out of blood, sweat and tears.

With it de Bres added a letter to King Philip II of Spain hoping that he would read the Confession and see that the Reformed Protestants weren't heretics but were preaching and teaching exactly what was taught in Scripture. The Reformers tried to show that they were a continuation of the true catholic church built on the foundation of Scripture.

Here is de Bres own words to King Philip II:

“The banishments, prisons, racks, exiles, tortures and countless other persecutions plainly demonstrate that our desire and conviction is not carnal, for we would lead a far easier life if we did not embrace and maintain this doctrine. But having the fear of God before our eyes, and being in dread of the warning of Jesus Christ, who tells us that He shall forsake us before God and His Father if we deny Him before men, we suffer our backs to be beaten, our tongues to be cut, our mouths to be gagged and our whole body to be burnt, for we know that he who would follow Christ must take up his cross and deny himself...

“And because we are persecuted as if we were not only enemies of your throne and the commonwealth, but also enemies of God and His Church, we humble pray you judge this by the Confession of faith, which we lay before you and which we are ready and willing, if necessary, *to seal with our own blood.*

“From this Confession we trust that you will see that we are wrongly called schismatics ...”
(Guido de Brés, Letter to King Phillip II, taken from the Belgic Confession).

The Belgic Confession was written in French but was quickly translated into Dutch and other languages. It was adopted by the Synod of Antwerp as the confession of faith of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands in 1566. By 1571 it was required that all Reformed Church ministers subscribe to it, meaning literally signing your name at the bottom of it as a way of showing agreement. From this practice arose the Form of Subscription that has been used in Reformed Churches and in the CRC since its beginning.

By 1619 the Three Standards of Unity were in cement, and all officers of the church, pastors, elders, deacons, and professors had to sign the Form of Subscription testifying to their commitment to the Standard as the accurate statement of what is taught in Scripture. I signed it when I became your pastor.

With heart and mouth I sincerely and in good conscience before God believe this to be a faithful and true testimony of the teaching of God’s Holy Word.

Indeed, the Belgic Confession is one of the best statements of Reformed Doctrine still in existence and one of the most recognized symbols of the Reformed faith in the world. This is the flag of the Reformed Church, the banner under which we are united.

It’s indeed a beautiful flower that blossomed out of the storm of the Reformation of the 16th century. It was finally translated into English by the Reformed Church in America in 1788. The English version was approved by the CRC in 1912.

Let me remind you of what I said last week. A creed or confession of faith is not the very voice of Divine Truth, but, as one person put it so well, they are *an echo of that Truth* from souls that have heard and studied the truth and believed it in their hearts and felt its power and surrendered to it and have summarized it in writing for others to understand.

Beginning next week we will look to Scripture to see and judge just how faithfully the Belgic reflects the unchangeable, infallible, trustworthy Word of the Living God.

“Through many tribulations, Guido de Bres entered the kingdom of God. He left a Confession for us, a faithful summary of what Scripture teaches. Would you die for that Confession? Would you suffer for it? Would you give up family and friends for the doctrine of the Old and New Testament summarized in that Confession?” (W.L. Bredenhof).

Let me leave you with the words of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 10:37-39, “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Hebrews 10:35-36 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.