

## Why Study the Belgic Confession?

*Text: Belgic Confession 1; I Timothy 3:14-4:6*

We begin our study of the *Belgic Confession*—one of the most significant doctrinal standards of the Reformed faith. Authored in 1561 by Guido de Brès [“GEE-doe da-BRAY”] during a time of intense persecution, this confession was intended to provide a clear, systematic, and biblical statement of faith on behalf of the persecuted Reformed churches in the Lowlands (modern-day Belgium and the Netherlands). It forms, alongside the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Canons of Dordt*, one of the “Three Forms of Unity” that define the confessional identity of these churches.

### The Content and Coherence of the Confession

Though often less familiar than the *Heidelberg Catechism* or the *Canons of Dordt*, the *Belgic Confession* possesses a warm and personal tone, expressing the church’s faith in phrases like, “We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth...” It follows a carefully constructed theological structure, beginning with the doctrine of God and Scripture, then moving through creation, the fall, redemption, the church, and concluding with the last things. This order, known as the “order of loci [‘LOW sye’],” reflects the historic arrangement of doctrines drawn from Scripture and helps believers grow in their understanding of the whole counsel of God.

The first articles treat the doctrine of God—His being, attributes, and the Trinity—followed by God’s revelation and the authority and sufficiency of Holy Scripture. Next come the works of God in creation and providence, then the fall of man, original sin, and the need for redemption. The person and work of Christ are central to the middle portion, with the confession proceeding to salvation, the church, the sacraments, and eschatology. This doctrinal progression was intentional and pedagogical, shaping not only what the churches believed but how they taught, confessed, and defended that belief.

One reason to study the *Belgic Confession* is precisely this coherent treatment of doctrine. While the *Heidelberg Catechism* is regularly used in preaching and instruction, and the *Canons of Dordt* are often read in connection with theological debates or church membership classes, the *Belgic Confession* can be overlooked. Yet its clarity, organisation, and theological richness make it

worthy of close study and ongoing use. Its structure alone shows how deeply rooted it is in Scripture and how thoroughly it aims to present the Christian faith.

### **The Reformation Context and Enduring Legacy**

Another reason for study is its historical importance. The confession was first published in 1561, making it older than the King James Version (1611) and one of the earliest comprehensive statements of Protestant belief. It was translated into Dutch in 1562, and soon after into Latin and German. Over time, it spread across the Reformed world and has now been translated into more than 20 languages. Its inclusion by the Synod of Dordt in 1618–1619 as one of the official doctrinal standards of the Dutch Reformed churches solidified its standing. It remains authoritative in Reformed churches across Europe, North America, and beyond.

The confession arose in the southern Lowlands – modern-day Belgium – then a center of vibrant Protestant activity. Cities like Brussels, Antwerp, Bruges, Ghent, Dunkirk, Ypres, and Tournai were home to flourishing Reformed congregations. Yet these churches suffered brutal persecution. The first Reformation martyrs, Henrik Voes and Jan van Essen, were burned in Brussels in 1523. William Tyndale was executed near the same city in 1536. Tens of thousands of Reformed believers were martyred under Charles V and Philip II; many survivors fled northward, westward, or eastward. The *Belgic Confession* thus bears witness to a now largely forgotten Reformation presence in Belgium – a region where the faith was all but extinguished through bloodshed.

Its author, Guido de Brès, was hanged in 1567 and his body burned. His confession was more than a theological statement—it was a pastoral and political appeal to Philip II of Spain to distinguish the peaceful, Bible-believing Reformed from the violent revolutionaries of the day. Article 37 concludes with the hope that the cause now condemned by men would in the end be vindicated as “the cause of the Son of God.” De Brès’ letter to Philip, often printed as a preface to the confession, pleads for justice: “If you desire blood, we are ready to offer our throats, provided that our cause be heard with justice.” This personal appeal, backed by theological precision, earned the respect of major Reformers. Calvin responded on behalf of Geneva, finding nothing in it contrary to Scripture. Later, Theodore Beza and his colleagues likewise endorsed it, recognising its faithfulness to the gospel. Geneva became a crucial theological anchor for the confession’s credibility.

## Its Relevance and Necessity for the Church Today

Beyond its theological depth and historical importance, the *Belgic Confession* remains a vital defense of biblical truth. One of its striking features is its explicit rejection of Anabaptist errors—on the sacraments, oaths, civil authority, and the nature of Christ’s flesh. This was no mere internal squabble; the Anabaptist excesses, especially after the Münster Rebellion, had stained Protestantism with accusations of political extremism and doctrinal instability. The *Belgic Confession* sought to distance the Reformed churches from those movements, clarifying their commitment to Scripture, order, and peace. This effort helped preserve the public credibility of the Reformed cause and protected the churches from state reprisals.

Today, the clarity of that witness is more needed than ever. Many modern Protestant churches—especially those shaped by revivalism, Pentecostalism, and non-denominationalism—bear far more resemblance to Anabaptist theology than to the Reformed tradition. Experiential subjectivism, doctrinal minimalism, and emotionalism often replace biblical teaching and confessional accountability. In that setting, the *Belgic Confession* serves as a bulwark: careful, scriptural, and unapologetically doctrinal.

Modern aversion to creeds has made slogans like “No creed but Christ” common. But this itself is a creed. The real issue is not whether a church has a creed, but whether it holds to a *sound* one. The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*—“I believe.” Scripture commands us to “hold fast the form of sound words” (II Tim. 1:13) and affirms that “all Scripture... is profitable for doctrine” (II Tim. 3:16). Churches are called to confess, teach, and defend the faith. Historically, when the church has been strongest, it has written and upheld confessions. When it has compromised or collapsed, it has neglected them.

The *Belgic Confession* remains one of the clearest and most courageous expressions of the church’s commitment to the truth of God’s Word. A confessional church is a confessing church. Confession is not a museum piece but a living duty. This document reminds us that biblical doctrine is worth articulating, preserving, and if necessary, dying for. In studying it, we join the testimony of those who—often in weakness and suffering—declared the truth of Christ with clarity, joy, and resolve.



Antwerp in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century