

GUIDO DE BRES & THE BELGIC CONFESSION

Reformation Sunday

October 31, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Given that this Sunday is one that our church, with appreciation, remembers its Reformation heritage, I'd like to take a few minutes to tell the story of Guido DeBres and the Birth of the Belgic Confession, of which he was its principle author.

The Belgic Confession is one of our 3 "Standards of Unity", along with the Canons of Dort (which we've gone through the past couple of months) and the Heidelberg Catechism. Later in this service we'll look at Article 36 of the Belgic Confession – on "Civil Government".

DeBres' story is one of great courage and love for the Word of God – may it inspire ours.

EARLY YEARS

He was born in 1522, 5 years after Martin Luther had nailed his 95 thesis on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg.

He was a native of the area known as the "Lowlands" (Nederlands), an area of 17 provinces – now Holland, Belgium, northern France. He was born in the city of Mons, capital of the southernmost province of Belgium.

He grew up in a tumultuous time & area. In the European Lowlands the new Reformation truths – the "Lutheran heresies" - were being embraced & spread. Guido's older brother, Christophe, a glassware merchant, used his trade as a cover for the distribution of Bibles and Reformation literature as he travelled all over Europe.

While a teenager, Guido procured a Bible – which he read, together with other Reformation literature. Before he was 25, he was converted to Christ and embraced the doctrines of the Reformers.

PERSECUTION

This, however, put his life in danger. At that time the Netherlands were under the sovereignty of Philip II of Spain. Philip was fiercely Roman Catholic and he was determined to stamp out this fledgling reformation in the Netherlands – where it was being received most hospitably. Ruling by means of his sister, Margaret, Philip undertook to punish heresy and harass every exponent of reform.

So he imported the Spanish Inquisition to the Netherlands. Philip's father, Charles, had himself begun this Inquisition in the Netherlands – in the 1540s. Philip took it over in the 1550's. His edict was this:

No one should print, write, copy, keep, buy, sell, or give any heretical book or writing, or hold to be present at any heretical meeting, or read, teach, or expound the holy Scriptures, or preach secretly or openly, or entertain any heretical opinions."

Those who dared to transgress this prohibition were not spared. One commentator remarks: *"All the great elements of nature were pressed into service – fire for burning, water for drowning, air for hanging, and earth for burying alive."*

By the 1560's this Inquisition became so severe that Philip is reputed to have vowed stubbornly to make a wilderness of the Netherlands rather than to allow it to be inhabited by heretics.

(Unfortunate to that vow, Philip underestimated the stubborn "steif-cops" he was up against! God's truth kept marching on!)

Nevertheless 100,000 Dutch citizens did lose their lives during this 1500's Inquisition.

TRAINING

So by the late 1540's, after DeBres had been converted and embraced the theology of the Reformation, he had to flee his homeland – his life being in danger. In 1548, he went to England. This was shortly after King Henry VIII died – and the Reformation there was prospering under the leadership of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, author of the Book of Common Prayer. He spent 4 years in England, attending classes in theology.

In 1552, he returned to the Low Countries and became a travelling preacher. He eventually settled in Lille (about 40 miles from the town he was born in) and ministered to a group of Christians who met secretly – calling themselves the church of the Rose.

In 1556, Philip's persecution caught up with this church – several members were martyred, the rest escaped to Frankfurt – a safer area where there was a Flemish (Lowland) congregation. There too was an English congregation there – because bloody Mary had ascended to the English throne – causing English Protestants to flee for their lives.

In September of 1556, John Calvin himself came up to Frankfurt to minister to these 2 congregations and there Guido met "The Man"! Under that influence, DeBres decided to go to Switzerland, first to Lausanne – to study under Theodore Beza (focusing on Greek & Hebrew study), then to Geneva, studying under Calvin.

After 3 years of study there, he returned to active ministry in the church.

MINISTRY

He returned to the town of Doornik, about 10 miles from Lille, where he became minister of a secret Protestant church called “The Church of the Palm”. There he met and fell in love with “dark-eyed” Catharine Ramon. In 1559 they were married.

That same year he began to work on a Confession of Faith – summarizing Christian doctrine so that the people would be kept from falling into error. The form of the Confession, as well as its content, drew largely from his training under Calvin (who had produced a similar confession – The Gallic Confession – about that same time).

At Doornik, as long as they stayed underground, the church was not greatly bothered. (The city magistrates did not assist Philip’s emissaries in their heresy hunts). So the church grew.

In 1561, however, another leader in the Church of the Palm, determined that it was time to come out in the open with their faith. 500 strong – in masks and cloaks – they marched the main streets of the city “lustily singing the Psalms of David”.

The magistrates would not tolerate this. They contacted Margaret, Philip’s sister, who dispatched her forces. Hundreds were interrogated, tortured, imprisoned.

DeBres, however, remained undetected in hiding. Before this round of persecution came, he had hoped that the Reformation would just gradually take-over Doornik, as it had in some areas of Germany. That, however, was not going to happen. He then became concerned to let the authorities know that they, as Protestants, weren’t revolutionaries and that they did not need to fear insurrection.

(At that time in Europe there were some Anabaptist groups who were extremely revolutionary – rejecting higher powers & magistrates.)

DeBres desired to let the governing authorities know that they were not of that ilk! Hence he conceived a plan to present to the King a copy of the “Protestant’s Confession of Faith” that he had been working on. So on Nov. 2, 1561, the gatekeeper of the castle of Doornik found a package which had been thrown over the wall the night before. It was addressed to King Philip II, and contained a copy of the Belgic Confession together with an open letter to the King’s commissioners, warning them that nothing they could do would prevent the progress of God’s work in Doornik. QUOTE – *“If you try by killing, for everyone who dies, a hundred will rise in his place. If you will not forsake your hardness and your murder, then we appeal to God to give us grace to patiently to endure for the glory of His name ... and heaven and earth will bear us witness that you have put us unjustly to death.”*

LAST YEARS

DeBres escaped Doornik in 1561 – going into exile in French towns near the Lowlands border. Early in 1562, his lodgings at Doornik were discovered – his papers burned publicly, along with an effigy in the Doornik market square.

For 5 years he and his family lived in relative peace, pastoring various Huguenot congregations in northern France. 3 times, in disguise, he visited Doornik – to see how the believers were doing there!

In 1567, he accepted a call to minister in Valenciennes, a city near the French border. As the church grew there, Philip dispatched fresh troops to quell the movement. Persecution grew and the people, against the counsel of DeBres, decided to resist.

Valenciennes was laid siege to. DeBres & some companions did manage to escape – but were recognized and captured. He was brought in chains to the castle of Doornik (the same place he had thrown his confession over the wall). There he was cruelly treated and eventually transferred back to Valenciennes – where he spent 7 weeks in an obscure and filthy dungeon known as “The Black Hole of Brunain”.

In those 7 weeks DeBres wrote a 233 page treatise on the Lord’s Supper, as well as a number of touching farewell letters. This is part of the letter he wrote to his wife:

My dear and well beloved wife in our Lord Jesus:

Your grief and anguish, troubling me in the midst of my joy and gladness, are the cause of my writing you this present letter. I most earnestly pray you not to be grieved beyond measure ... If the Lord had wished us to live together longer, He could easily have caused it to so to be. But such was not His pleasure. Let His good will be done then, and let that suffice for all reason. Moreover, consider that I have not fallen into the hands of my enemies by chance, but by the providence of my God, which guides and governs all things, small as well as great ... I pray you, my dear and faithful companion, to be glad with me, and to thank the good God for what He is doing, for He does nothing but what is altogether right and good ...

I am shut up in the strongest and wrtechedest of dungeons, so dark and gloomy that it goes by the name of the Black Hole. I can get but little air, and that of the foulest. I have on my hands and feet heavy irons which are a constant torture, galling the flesh even to my poor bones. But notwithstanding all, my God fails not to make good His promise, and to comfort my heart, and to give me a most blessed content ...

I pray you then, to be comforted in the Lord, to commit yourself and your affairs to Him, for He is the Husband of the widow and the Father of the fatherless, and he will never leave nor for sake you...

Good-bye, Catherine, my well beloved! I pray my God to comfort you, and give you resignation to His holy will.

Your faithful husband, Guido DeBres – Minister of God’s Word at Valenciennes, and at present prisoner for the Son of God.

Church historian Philip Schaff says that DeBres met his death “as if preparing for a marriage feast”. (Probably the result of his treatise on the Lord’s Supper.)

On May 31, 1567, 45 years of age, he was brought to the marketsquare of Valenciennes. Even as he reminded the gathered crowd to be respectful to the magistrates, and to continue faithful to the Word which had been preached to them, the hangman received his signal and threw his victim from the scaffold.

DeBres died. But the Confession he wrote remains ... and the FAITH for which he died lives today ... here in this place!

*“The grass withers and the flowers fall,
But the word of our God stands forever.” – Is. 40:8*

Song – “Ancient Words”

Sources:

Neil Plantinga – Introduction to the Belgic Confession

Peter Gadsby – Guido DeBres and the Birth of the Belgic Confession

Kim Riddleberger – “We Believe & Confess” – An Introduction to the Belgic Confession