



To Win Our
Neighbors for Christ

**Explorations in
Reformed Confessional Theology**

Editors

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To Win Our Neighbors for Christ

The Missiology of the Three Forms of Unity

Wes Bredenhof



REFORMATION HERITAGE BOOKS

Grand Rapids, Michigan

To Win Our Neighbors for Christ

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Reformation Heritage Books

2965 Leonard St. NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49525

616-977-0889 / Fax 616-285-3246

orders@heritagebooks.org

www.heritagebooks.org

Printed in the United States of America

15 16 17 18 19 20/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bredenhof, Wes.

To win our neighbors for Christ : the missiology of the three forms of unity / Wes Bredenhof.

pages cm. — (Explorations in Reformed confessional theology)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60178-375-2 (alk. paper)

1. Reformed Church—Creeds. 2. Belgic Confession. 3. Heidelberg Katechismus. 4. Canons of Dort. 5. Missions. I. Title.

BX9428.A1B74 2015

238'.42—dc23

2014046831

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Series Preface

The creeds of the ancient church and the doctrinal standards of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed churches are rich theological documents. They summarize the essential teachings of Scripture, express biblical doctrines in meaningful and memorable ways, and offer pastoral guidance for the heads and hearts of God's people. Nevertheless, when twenty-first-century readers pick up these documents, certain points may be found confusing, misunderstood, or irrelevant for the church.

The Exploration in Reformed Confessional Theology series intends to clarify some of these confessional issues from four vantage points. First, it views confessional issues from the *textual* vantage point, exploring such things as variants, textual development, and the development of language within the documents themselves as well as within the context in which these documents were written. Second, this series views confessional issues from the *historical* vantage point, exploring social history and the history of ideas that shed light upon these issues. Third, this series views confessional issues from the *theological* vantage point, exploring the issues of intra- and inter-confessional theology both in the days these documents

were written as well as our day. Fourth, this series views confessional issues from the *pastoral* vantage point, exploring the pressing pastoral needs of certain doctrines and the implications of any issues that cause difficulty in the confessions.

In exploring our vast and deep heritage in such a way, our ultimate goal is to “walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:10).

—Daniel R. Hyde and Mark Jones

Author's Preface

The exercise is simple: Find the latest book introducing the study of Christian missions. If it mentions the history of missions, you can expect to read that the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was a movement lacking missionary zeal. German mission scholars even coined a technical term for this alleged dearth of missionary enthusiasm: *missionslauheit* (missions-lukewarmness). Missiology can be defined as the science or study of mission in all its different aspects—it is an academic endeavor that has the task of delineating the what and how of mission. It has virtually become a given in this field that the Reformation was not oriented to the missionary task of the church, and this has been repeated so often that it has become a truism.

The claim appears to have been made first by Gustav Warneck in the nineteenth century.¹ It has since appeared in many other texts. For example, a missions textbook entitled *Introducing World Missions* claimed,

1. Gustav Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time* (New York: Fleming H. Revel Company, 1901), 19.

“The Protestant Reformers Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Calvin said little about foreign mission. Believing that the world had been evangelized centuries before, they focused their energies on reforming Christian life within the Western church.”² Similarly, Timothy Tennent’s recent *Invitation to World Missions* claims that “the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation did not produce *any* missionaries.”³ This sweeping claim is easy to refute. Besides the hundreds of young men sent out to evangelize pseudo-Christian Europe, the Reformed church of Geneva sent out foreign missionaries to Brazil in 1556. These missionaries worked, albeit briefly, among the Tupinamba Indians.⁴ First-generation Reformers such as William Farel and Anthony Saucier worked to bring the Waldensian movement into greater conformity with the biblical gospel.⁵ Martin Bucer has been described as a “father of Reformed mission.”⁶ His writings are full of evidence of missionary fervor. More

2. A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 120–21.

3. Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 248 (emphasis added).

4. Wes Bredenhof, “John Calvin and Missions,” *Christian Renewal* 27, no. 11 (February 25, 2009), 24.

5. Giorgio Tourn et al., *You Are My Witnesses: The Waldensians across 800 Years* (Torino: Claudiana Editrice, 1989), 69–73.

6. L. J. Joosse, *Reformatie en zending, Bucer en Walaeus: vaders van reformatorische zending* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre B.V., 1988).

examples could be mentioned.⁷ Despite this, it is remarkable that missiologists continue to claim, for at least two related reasons, that the Reformation was deficient in regard to missions.

First, this claim has a long history. As mentioned above, my research reveals that it has been circulating since at least 1874, when missiologist Gustav Warneck (1834–1910) asserted it. With the passage of time, it has simply become an established “fact,” even though just a cursory investigation reveals a different picture.

Second, this claim simply demonstrates the theological prejudice of the first ones to make it rather than being based on historical data. The first ones to make this claim, along with many others down the line, had little sympathy for the Reformation and its concerns.⁸ Some even had an antipathy for the Reformation. With such an attitude, the Reformation was presented in mission history for *what it must have been* rather than for *what it really was*.

I intend to revisit this issue with a view to three of the historic Reformation confessions: the Belgic Confession,

7. See Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

8. For other examples, see David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 245. Stephen Neill's complete silence about the Reformation speaks volumes in *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Penguin, 1964). Another book that says nothing about the Reformation is Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1983).

the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. Known as the Three Forms of Unity, these have been widely adopted by Reformed churches around the world. In an earlier book, *For the Cause of the Son of God*, I dealt specifically with the missionary significance of the Belgic Confession at length.⁹ Since I did not have the opportunity to explore the Heidelberg Catechism and Canons of Dort in that work, and because these standards remain relatively neglected by missiologists, I intend to demonstrate that all three of these documents have much to offer this field of study.

To say that the Reformation and the confessional documents it produced have little or nothing to say about mission is simply mistaken. Proving that is one goal of this book. The other goal is to help Reformed believers understand their own confessions and how these confessions drive them to care about a world lost in unbelief. Our confessional heritage also leads us to action for those enslaved to sin and unbelief because it is biblical—a faithful summary of the message of God's Word. Contrary to what many missiologists would have us believe, giving more attention to our confessional standards will make us more mission oriented and outward looking, not less.

To be clear, and by way of introduction, this is the definition of mission I will be working with: Mission is the official sending of the church to go and make disciples

9. Wes Bredenhof, *For the Cause of the Son of God: The Missionary Significance of the Belgic Confession* (Fellsmere, Fla.: Reformation Media & Press, 2011).

by preaching and witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ in all nations through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ I would add that I do not see any biblical justification for a strict distinction between mission and evangelism—in fact, the mission of the church is evangelism. Consequently, my prayer is that this book will serve the glory of God through the advance of the gospel through believers who are ever more eager to share the glad tidings of our great Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

I would like to express my gratitude to several people. First, I appreciate the invitation from Rev. Daniel Hyde to write more on this topic. He and Rev. Shane Lems asked me to contribute a chapter regarding the Reformed confessions and mission for a 2011 Reformation Heritage Books volume, *Planting, Watering, Growing: Planting Confessionally Reformed Churches in the 21st Century*. Some of the material from that chapter reappears in this book.

As part of my research, I sent a questionnaire to several Reformed missionaries serving in different parts of the world. Many of their answers to my questions are incorporated in the text. Thanks to Rev. Cornelis Kleyn, Rev. Jim Witteveen, Rev. Glem Melo, Rev. Henk Drost, Rev. Ian Wildeboer, and Rev. Paul Aasman. I know you all are busy men, but I appreciate that you took the time to help.

10. Readers who wish to pursue the exegetical development of this definition can refer to chapter 2 of *For the Cause of the Son of God*, by Bredenhof.

I also want to thank Dr. Ted VanRaalte for his advice and assistance with some further research into the Belgic Confession. Last of all, I express thanks to Tim Denbok for his assistance and giving some helpful feedback.



The Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession is one of a kind: it is the only ecclesiastically adopted confession written by a martyr.¹ It emerges from a dark age of persecution and bears the marks of that age from beginning to end. The 1560s saw many Reformed believers suffer and die for their faith.

Historical Background

Philip II (1527–1598) of Spain ruled over the region known as the Low Countries (Netherlands) during the time the Confession was written. The region was made up of seventeen independent provinces in what is today The Netherlands, Belgium, and part of northern France. Philip was well known for his passionate hatred of any non-Roman Catholic religion. He thought of himself

1. At least one other Reformation-era confession, the Guanabara Confession, was written by martyrs. This confession was penned by three Reformed men sentenced to death in Brazil in 1558. It was also the first Protestant confession written in the Americas. However, unlike the Belgic Confession, it was never officially adopted by any church.

as a pillar of the church on a divine mission to eradicate heresy.² His being so anxious to prove himself a valiant defender of the faith partly accounts for great bloodshed when the Reformation came to the Low Countries. One author justifiably called the Low Countries “the epicentre of heresy executions in Europe.”³

The author of the Belgic Confession was Guido (or Guy) de Brès (1522–1567).⁴ De Brès was born in 1522, hailing from Mons in the present-day region of southwestern Belgium. His parents were devout Roman Catholics, though it was his mother especially who provided his religious upbringing. In 1547, de Brès was converted to the Reformed faith. Shortly after his conversion, de Brès fled to England, where he received theological training from the Polish Reformer John à Lasco (1499–1560).⁵ In 1552, he returned to the Low Countries and became a pastor in Lille. Soon, however, persecutions arose again, and he was

2. Robert Collinet, *La Réformation en Belgique au XVI^e Siècle* (Brussels: Editions de la Librairie des Eclaireurs Unionistes, 1958), 68.

3. William Monter, “Heresy Executions in Reformation Europe, 1520–1565,” in *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57.

4. Not much has been written in English on the biography of de Brès, and certainly nothing at an academic level. However, see Thea B. Van Halsema, *Glorious Heretic: The Story of Guido de Brès* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961). In Dutch the latest research is represented by E. M. Braekman, E. A. De Boer, Ruth Pieterman, and Madeleine Gimpel, *Guido de Brès: zijn leven, zijn belijden* (Utrecht: Kok, 2011).

5. E. M. Braekman, *Guy de Brès, I. Sa Vie* (Brussels: Editions de la Librairie des Eclaireurs Unionistes, 1960), 59.

forced to flee to the Protestant regions of Germany and Switzerland. After a short time in Frankfurt, he undertook further studies under Pierre Viret (1511–1571) in Lausanne and then spent some time in Geneva. Eventually the persecutions let up for a time, and de Brès could return to his homeland in 1559. Around the same time he married Catherine Ramon, who was from Tournai, the place where de Brès was serving as pastor. It was during this period, around 1561, that he wrote the Belgic Confession.

Persecutions resumed in late 1561, and de Brès escaped south to France for nearly five years. In 1566 he returned to the Low Countries to become a pastor of the church in Valenciennes. However, soon after returning, the city was rocked by iconoclastic activity that provoked the Spanish authorities to besiege the city during a year that has come to be known as the Wonder Year (*wonderjaar*) in Dutch history. After the siege broke in March 1567, de Brès was captured, and on May 30 he was martyred for his faith. The official charge was celebrating the Lord's Supper contrary to the order of the magistrates. De Brès died a martyr, but the confession he wrote would live on.

As already mentioned, the Belgic Confession was written in the early part of 1561. Its first printing has been pinpointed to May 25, 1561.⁶ Very little is known about the exact way in which it was written. It is known that de Brès lived in a discreet spot at the back of a house

6. Nicolaas Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 30.

in the neighborhood of St. Brice (or Brixe) and that his study was nearby, close to the walls of the city.⁷ It is likely that the Confession was written there, with de Brès doing the greatest part of the work. It is thought that after he wrote it, he shared it with some colleagues who may have given some editorial input toward the final product. Since the two original editions of 1561 have so many printing mistakes, it seems that the Confession was printed rather hastily without much proofreading.⁸

The Confession came to public light later in 1561. However, it appears that by then it had been adopted by the Reformed churches of the Low Countries, or at least some of them. There is evidence of a meeting of ministers in February 1561, and the Confession was probably officially adopted at this meeting. This would also explain the subtitle of the original Confession, which indicates that it was made “in common agreement by the faithful” of the Low Countries. This means that the Belgic Confession was not a personal confession of faith by de Brès that was later adopted by the churches; rather, from the beginning it was an official ecclesiastical confession of faith.⁹ This would also explain the use of the first person plural throughout the Confession, beginning with article 1, “We believe....”

After becoming public in fall 1561, the Confession was thrown over the castle wall in Tournai on November 1, and

7. Gootjes, *Belgic Confession*, 49.

8. Gootjes, *Belgic Confession*, 32.

9. Gootjes, *Belgic Confession*, 114–15.

it is not known who did this. On October 15, the authorities had discovered a copy of the Confession in the home of Jean du Mortier, a leader in the Reformed church.¹⁰

In the following year, two more printings appeared. The Confession underwent a revision in 1566 by the Synod of Antwerp, and most of the changes were of a cosmetic nature. The Synod of Dort (1618–1619) also revised the Belgic Confession, established definitive French and Dutch texts, and commissioned a Latin text.¹¹ Most editions of the Belgic Confession used in Reformed churches today are based on these texts of Dort.

The Belgic Confession is the oldest of the Three Forms of Unity. It is also the one that most bears the marks of John Calvin's (1509–1564) influence, even down to particular expressions or arguments drawn straight from the Genevan Reformer. There were other influences as well, but given that the Belgic has often been regarded as a recasting of the French Confession of 1559 (in the writing of which Calvin had a direct role), it would not be inaccurate to assert that it is essentially Calvin speaking French with a Walloon accent.

As we shall see, the missionary significance of the Confession is intimately tied up with its purpose. It was intended not only to convince the Roman Catholic authorities of the legitimacy of the Reformed churches

10. Gootjes, *Belgic Confession*, 17.

11. H. H. Kuyper, *De Post-Acta of Nahandelingen van de Nationale Synode van Dordrecht in 1618 en 1619 gehouden....* (Amsterdam: Hoveker & Wormser, 1899), 107.

and to persuade them to be tolerant, but also, most importantly, to win them to the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Unlike so many today, Guido de Brès and the Reformed churches he served did not regard the Roman Catholic Church as a bearer of the biblical good news, nor did they regard Roman Catholics as brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead, they were regarded as lost and in need of the good news of salvation.

The Belgic Confession is one of the most highly regarded Reformation confessions. It has been adopted by dozens of churches around the world. For example, it is a confession of faith for the Evangelical Reformed Church of Ukraine, the Reformed Churches of Brazil, the First Evangelical Reformed Church of Singapore, and the United Reformed Church in Congo. It has been translated into numerous languages including Portuguese, German, Greek, Russian, Burmese, and Chinese. It has been tested against the Scriptures for hundreds of years and has been found to be a faithful summary of the Word of God.¹² There is little question that it will continue to serve Reformed churches well for coming generations, even as they consider their missionary calling.

12. It is true that over the years there have been changes and revisions, some more substantial than others. For example, one well-known case is article 36 regarding what it says about civil government. For some discussion on that, see Bredenhof, *For the Cause of the Son of God*, 192–95. Despite some of these revisions, the overall picture is one of remarkable consistency and faithfulness.

A Missionary Document in the Past

Today, various kinds of documents—tracts and pamphlets, for example—have a missionary purpose. Some books authored by Christians are intended to win the lost to Christ. There are also evangelistic magazines geared toward spreading the gospel message. We might be tempted to think that these sorts of publications are a modern phenomenon. Very few people pause to consider that missionary documents were also written and published during the Reformation. One of those is the Belgic Confession.

The Reformation View of Roman Catholicism

To understand this, we have to come to terms with the way Reformers such as Guido de Brès viewed the Roman Catholic Church and its members. In today's context, many who claim to be Bible-believing Christians have a more positive view of Roman Catholicism, and this has become increasingly evident in contemporary mission studies. Timothy Tennent, for example, writes uncritically of Roman Catholic missionaries spreading the gospel.¹³ He refers to them as “brothers and sisters” and depicts the Roman Catholics in Karol Wojtyła’s (later, Pope John Paul II) Polish congregation as worshiping Jesus Christ.¹⁴ In recent years, initiatives like Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) and the Manhattan Declaration, which

13. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 254.

14. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions*, 50, 433.