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# Nicholaas H. Gootjes, The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources

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Nicholaas H. Gootjes, *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007. Pp.240. \$29.99.

**Reviewed by John B. Roney, Sacred Heart University, Connecticut**

Creeds, confessions, and catechisms have become far less popular than in previous centuries, but they remain important summaries of faith and interpretations of the Bible. If the important Reformation confessions can remain significant in our contemporary world they must demonstrate their relevance by interpreting them in light of their historical background and the questions of the day they attempted to address. Confessions need to employ some methods of biblical hermeneutics. Every document has an intended audience, and historically some questions and social positions are more relevant to one age than to another; however, there are also timeless questions about God, nature, and human nature that must be addressed by every generation. Nicholaas Gootjes has offered an important work in his academic study of the history and meaning of the Belgic Confession (BC). Some of the more widely used confessions, such as the Westminster, Heidelberg, and Augsburg have received far more study than the BC; therefore, this is a welcome addition.

Most of the substantial creeds and confessions in the history of Christianity have been formulated to combat large-scale problems in the Christian faith and community. The Reformation confessions were born in a need to reform the church from within. They had to also contend with the external political issues arising in the birth of new states and their legitimacy. Gootjes places the BC within the context of a political and religious struggle in the Low Countries. While prosperous towns and cities had a tradition of relative freedom to pursue their own destinies, Phillip II of Spain began to exact a strict centralization that denied local leadership and economic control. But the cataclysmic events began when Phillip II not only stripped the region of its political and economic freedoms, but when his very ultramontane Catholicism stood in stark contrast to both a nascent Netherlandish piety and the new humanist sensibilities spread through the region. The established city of Doornik, also known by its' French name Tournai, became a vital center of protest. Guido de Brès was a long time Reformed pastor there, and Gootjes has assigned him authorship of the confession, named after the region Belgica, recognized already by the Romans and later resurrected in 1830 when the Kingdom of Belgium was formed. For his part in religious and political rebellion, de Brès was executed on 31 May 1567.

One could argue that while a particular doctrinal statement has an official date or origin in a creed or confession, its authority and orthodoxy are rooted in far older Christian beliefs, doctrines, and practices. Jean Calvin and Theodore Beza were particularly interested in tracing their statements to the church fathers and the practices of the early church. Although de Brès was certainly the principle author, confessions often come out of the life of a community of faith, and each participant in the process may have slightly different emphases, foci, and arguments based on the current questions of the day. In a close examination of the BC, Gootjes has compared its content to the pre-existing Reformed confession in the French-speaking world (namely the Gallican Confession) and looked at

how Calvin and Beza responded. Several differences appear, all of which demonstrate a distinct context. It is “beyond doubt,” Gootjes concludes, “that Guido de Brès followed the Gallican Confession,” and that there are no substantial differences in doctrine (65). Any apparent differences are matters focus or responses to regional differences.

Gootjes has located the date of the first copy of the BC sometime in the year 1561. We know of its existence via reports of a committee sent by the Governor of the Netherlands, Margaret of Parma, to investigate rebellion. The intention of the growing Reformed community was to proclaim publically its allegiance to God’s Word, and it wanted to distinguish itself from Catholic, Lutheran, and Anabaptist beliefs. In terms of religious issues, the BC needed to distinguish a Reformed belief from Anabaptist and Lutheran doctrines. In the context of the more pastoral needs, the BC is not as scholarly as the Gallican, or the confession of Beza; it is “made for the general believers who believe with the heart and confess with the mouth” (76). The more striking difference between the French confessions and the BC is the place of the state in relation to the church. The earliest statements in the BC stood against government intervention in ecclesiastical affairs (something Calvin had advocating since his arrival Geneva), at a time when the Low Countries were under great persecution. The Synod of 1566 reversed its decision and in a revised BC advocated the reform of the church by the state, because the Inquisition had begun to wane and the Calvinist leadership wanted to convince the crown that it could work within its realm.

The crucial test of the authority and use of the BC was established at the Synod of Dort, 1618-19. In order to refute the doctrines of Jacob Arminius and the articles of the *Remonstrance*, the Reformed hierarchy used articles in the Belgic and the Heidelberg confessions, thus demonstrating their authoritative standing. Gootjes ends his study with a helpful discussion of the many translations of the BC since the sixteenth century; and to allow further study, there is also an appendix containing ten important documents, from the original commissioner’s letter of 1561 to references to the BC in 1651.