

Chapter 11

The Belgic Confession and the True Church

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Dr. James M. Renihan has been a distinguished servant of Christ as a minister, teacher, and scholar as well as a Christian husband and father. It has been a privilege for me to be his friend and colleague over many years and I am very pleased to join in this project to honor him. My choice of topics may seem a strange one: Does the Belgic Confession, as some claim, require its subscribers to confess that all Baptist churches are false churches? As one who subscribes the Belgic Confession, I want to understand the meaning of the Confession for my work and cooperation with others. Dr. Renihan, as a strong confessionalist himself, will also appreciate the value of this topic (even as it may cause him to smile). This question is important to our cooperation across confessional differences without compromise in our common commitment to Christ's truth and to our Reformation heritage.

The Belgic Confession (1561) has been the confession of faithful Dutch Reformed churches for over 450 years. The confession was written by the minister and missionary Guido De Bres during a time of great persecution of Reformed churches in the Netherlands. De Bres himself died a martyr at the hands of the Roman Catholic civil authorities in 1567. He wrote the Belgic Confession to distinguish clearly the teaching of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands both from the Roman Catholic Church and from the Anabaptist churches there.

The Belgic Confession has a strong and detailed doctrine of the church which reflects the Reformed conviction that the church was a central doctrinal concern and that the reform of the church according to the Bible was a key work of the Reformation. The

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Roman Church had long insisted that it was the only true church and that membership in that church was necessary for salvation. The Reformers strongly rejected these claims of the Roman Church and indeed concluded that Rome was in fact a false church, not a true church.

John Calvin had developed a strong doctrine of the church in several of his writings, most notably the fourth book of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and in his treatise on “The Necessity of Reforming the Church.” Calvin is also believed to have been the principal author of the Confession of the French Reformed Churches of 1559. In that Confession nine articles out of forty (namely Articles 25-33) are devoted to the doctrine of the church.

The French Confession of 1559 is an important source which De Bres used in writing the Belgic Confession. He followed closely the order and teaching of Calvin’s Confession. While De Bres has six articles on the church in his confession (Articles 27-32), his teaching is more specific and detailed on some points, particularly on the marks of the true church. Calvin characteristically taught two marks (preaching and sacraments), whereas De Bres added the third mark of discipline.

De Bres’ strong doctrine of the church at least in part reflected the particular ecclesiastical situation that he faced in the Netherlands. He wanted to make clear the differences between Rome and Reformed Christianity on the church. He wanted to show that the Reformed doctrine of the church was biblical and the Roman doctrine was of human invention.

De Bres also wanted to distinguish clearly between the Reformed and Dutch Anabaptists, who also claimed that their churches were the only true churches. The Dutch Anabaptist movement rejected infant baptism in the interests of a pure church composed of those who individually believed and were committed to living a righteous life separated from the world. These Anabaptists departed from the gospel of the Bible and the Reformation by making works foundational to justification. Among the Dutch Anabaptists some believed that the righteous standards of the law required a church to withdraw from the wicked world as much as possible, becoming pacifists and refusing any involvement with ordinary civil governments. Others wanted violently to

overthrow the civil government to establish a kingdom of righteousness now on earth. (Hence the language of Belgic Confession, Article 36, “Wherefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists and other seditious people . . .”) Today the violent wing of Anabaptism has disappeared, but in the sixteenth century it was the wing that non-Anabaptists saw as the dominant and most characteristic group. Lutherans and Reformed wanted strongly to dissociate themselves from this violent and dangerous movement.

The character of Dutch Anabaptism as understood by De Bres becomes clear in the three explicit references to it in the Confession. The first is in Article 18 on “The Incarnation of Jesus Christ,” where De Bres wrote: “. . . we confess (in opposition to the heresy of the Anabaptists, who deny that Christ assumed human flesh of His mother) . . .” Menno Simons’ novel doctrine of the celestial flesh of Christ is here sharply rejected as a heresy against catholic Christology. The second reference is in Article 34 on “Holy Baptism”: “we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers . . .” This error (not heresy!) leads to the terrible conclusion that most Christians are not baptized at all. The third reference is in Article 36, “The Magistracy”:

we detest the error of the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God has established among men.

Here De Bres rejects the doctrine and practice of all those who undermine proper social order through their sedition. This picture of Anabaptism shows how far removed that movement is from the character of confessional Baptist churches which embrace historic catholic Christology and eschew sedition.

The Belgic Confession begins its discussion of the church with an examination of the basic character of the church: Article 27, “Of

the Catholic Church.”¹ This article focuses on the essence of what the church is. The church is an “assembly of true Christian believers, expecting all their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by his blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Ghost.” The heart of this definition is that the church is the gathering of those who are truly saved in Christ.

We should also note that here and throughout the Confession the focus is on the church in terms of local congregations. The assembly of believers, the offices of minister, elder, and deacon (Article 30), and the marks of preaching, sacraments, and discipline (Article 29) are all elements in the first place of the local church, as established by God in his Word. The church is not a church of popes, bishops, and priests as Rome taught or a church of prophets as some Dutch Anabaptists taught. Rather, it is preeminently a congregation of the faithful.

Article 28, “Of the Communion of the Saints with the True Church,” addresses the vital and necessary relationship of Christians to the church. Christians are not to live in isolation from one another, but must be part of the life of a true church of Christ. Confessional Reformed Baptists would heartily agree with the understanding of the church stated in Articles 27 and 28 of the Belgic Confession.

Since connection with the true church is so important, Article 29, “On the Marks of the Church,” tells Christians how they may recognize the true church among the many groups that claim that name. Article 30, “On the Government of the Church,” states how according to the Word of God the church is to be governed through ministers, elders, and deacons. Article 31, “On the Calling of Ministers,” shows how ministers, elders, and deacons are to be chosen by election and honored in the church. Finally Article 32, “On the Power of the Church in Establishing Ecclesiastical Laws and in Administering Discipline,” shows the extent and limits of the power of the church in directing its own life under the Word of God.

The discussion of the true church and how to recognize it is most fully addressed in Article 29. This article, which is at the center

¹ The titles of the articles cited in this essay are not the standard English ones, but are my translation of the Latin titles in Philip Schaff’s *Creeds of Christendom*.

of the concern of this study, makes several points. The first is that the true church must be discerned from the teaching of the Word of God because many claim the title of church which are not faithful to the Scriptures. Here the claims of popes and Anabaptist prophets are implicitly rejected. Second, while the true church will have hypocrites in it, it remains distinct from all sects. By sects here the Confession seems to reject groups that have excessive, non-biblical claims of moral purity for their adherents. Third, the article lists three marks by which Christians can identify the true church: “if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin . . .” Fourth, the article summarizes the three marks in terms of adherence to the teaching of the Word of God alone and recognition that Jesus is the only head of the church: “in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.” Fifth, to aid Christians in identifying the true church, Article 29 notes the marks of Christians who will be found in the true church. Christians are those who believe in Christ as their savior, pursue righteousness, repent of the infirmity that clings to them, and seek refuge in Jesus. Sixth, the three marks of the false church are presented in contrast to the three marks of the true church:

she ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit to the yoke of Christ. Neither does she administer the Sacraments, as appointed by Christ in his Word, but adds to and takes from them as she thinks proper; she relieth more upon men than upon Christ; and persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God, and rebuke her for her errors, covetousness, and idolatry.

And finally, this article assures us that the true church and the false church are easily distinguished from one another.

Some in reading Article 29 have suggested that the article means to distinguish sects from false churches. I believe that this reading of the article is wrong. The terms are used largely synonymously. The

true church is contrasted with “all sects” which claim the name church and Christians are called upon to distinguish the true church from the sects. This same word, distinguish, is used at the end of the article when Christians are told that it is easy to distinguish the true church from the false church. No distinct definition or characteristic of a sect over against a false church is given in the article. Clearly sect and false church are simply used interchangeably.

In reflecting on the Confession’s teaching on the marks of the true church some Christians have understandably asked if the Belgic Confession intends to label all Baptist churches as false churches since they deny the sacrament of baptism to the children of believers. Clearly at least some Baptist churches preach the gospel faithfully and practice biblical discipline. If “the pure administration of the sacraments” is a mark of the true church, however, must it not follow that Baptist churches are not true churches? In its most pointed form, the question, as we noted at the beginning of this essay, is this: Does the Belgic Confession require its subscribers to confess that all Baptist churches are not true churches?

This is an important question. It is important for Reformed Christians and churches that want to be fully confessional. And it is important as Reformed Christians seek to communicate honestly and lovingly with Baptist friends. To answer this question we must examine the historical setting and doctrinal teaching of the Belgic Confession very carefully. Although the conclusion that all Baptist churches are false churches may seem inevitable and unavoidable, in fact it is not. Indeed, reflection on the doctrinal teaching and historical setting of the Belgic Confession leads to quite a different conclusion.

Let us look more carefully at the marks. First, we can notice that three times the word “pure” is used in Article 29. The French word in the original text of the Confession [*pure*] means pure, unmingled, unalloyed or unadulterated. It does not mean absolutely perfect, but rather genuine. The preaching of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and the practice of discipline in the true church are not always perfect.

If we focus on the mark of the sacraments, history shows us that the confessionally Reformed did not believe that the Lutheran

doctrine of the Lord's Supper was perfect, but they did believe that the Lutheran churches were true churches. Indeed, the Zwinglian doctrine of the eucharist is not perfect (and probably cannot be conformed to the high Calvinist eucharistic theology in the Belgic Confession), but the Reformed always acknowledged that the Reformed church of Zurich was a true church. The Dutch Reformed invited that true Reformed church to the Synod of Dort in 1618. Also, the great Reformed scholastic theologian of seventeenth-century Geneva, Francis Turretin, indicated clearly that he regarded Lutheran and Zwinglian churches as true churches in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Eighteenth Topic, "The Church," specifically in the Tenth Question, "Where was our church before Luther and Zwingli, and how was it preserved?"²

We can make a similar point in looking at the discussion of the government of the church in Article 30. That article states:

We believe that this true Church must be governed by the spiritual policy which our Lord has taught us in his Word—namely, that there must be Ministers or Pastors to preach the Word of God, and to administer the Sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together, with the pastors, form the council of the Church . . .

But Lutheran and Anglican churches did not follow this polity, the Lutherans neglecting the office of elder and the Anglicans adding the office of bishop. Yet they were recognized as true churches. Anglican church leaders served as members of the Synod of Dort as representatives of a true Reformed church and one Anglican bishop was a very influential member of the Synod. And at the Synod of Dort the Anglican church approved the Belgic Confession, except what it taught about church government!

Are we being unfair to Baptists to suggest that they are not true churches, when we recognize Lutheran, Anglican, and Zwinglian churches as true churches? Or are we being inconsistent and in the name of confessional consistency should label them all false

² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), XVIII.9.10.

churches? If we choose the latter option, we must recognize that we are going against the interpretation of the Belgic Confession that the Dutch Reformed churches have always held. The historical evidence should encourage us to consider being as inclusive of the Baptists as of others.

Some may wonder, however, whether the Confession's explicit rejection of Anabaptist views does not mean that it regards the Baptist churches as false churches. Such a conclusion would be entirely a-historical. The Baptist churches today are not descended from the Anabaptist churches of the sixteenth century. Rather, they are largely churches that developed out of Reformed churches in the seventeenth century from a conviction that believer's baptism was more faithful to the Bible. Baptists are not Anabaptists historically and it is anachronistic to believe that the Confession speaks explicitly about Baptists.

In rejecting the idea that the confession teaches that Baptist churches are not true churches, we do not rely only on historical evidence, however. The theology of the marks of the true church in the Belgic Confession itself also makes that point doctrinally.

The three marks of the true church are not expressed simply in abstract terms. These marks are not only presented positively in Article 29, but are also contrasted with the three marks of the false church. We understand the meaning of the marks of the true church fully only when we see them contrasted with the marks of the false church. The first mark of the true church is that "the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein . . ." That mark is contrasted and explained in relation to the first mark of the false church: "she ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ." The false church adds her own ordinances to the gospel by her authority and therefore does not accept the pure gospel of Christ given in the Scriptures.

The third mark of the true church is this: "church discipline is exercised in punishing sin . . ." By contrast, the false church's third mark is that it "relieth more upon men than upon Christ; and persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God, and rebuke her for her errors, covetousness, and idolatry." The false church, far from punishing sin, persecutes those who live holy lives

and critique sin.

Also on the second mark the marks of the true and false churches illumine one another. The true church “maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ . . .” The false church, by contrast, does not “administer the Sacraments, as appointed by Christ in his Word, but adds to and takes from them as she thinks proper . . .” Failure to rightly administer the sacraments is especially where the Word of God is violated in increasing or decreasing the biblical number of sacraments. Twice in Article 29, in both the marks of the true church and the marks of the false church, reference is made to the sacraments instituted [*ordonnes*] by Christ. In Article 33, “Of the Sacraments,” we read: “Moreoever, we are satisfied with the number of Sacraments which Christ our Lord hath instituted [*ordonnes*], which are two only . . .” A primary concern about the pure administration of the sacraments is that only the two instituted by Christ be used in the church. Rome had seven sacraments and many Anabaptist churches had three (including footwashing). Baptist churches do maintain the two sacraments instituted by Christ, seek to understand them only according to the Word of God, and therefore do meet the most stressed elements of the second mark of the true church.

Both the history of Dutch Reformed thought and practice as well as the doctrinal statements of the Belgic Confession themselves then lead to the conclusion that the Confession does not require its adherents to declare that all Baptist churches are false churches. Indeed the best reading of the Confession leads to the opposite conclusion.

The Belgic Confession is indeed sharply critical of Anabaptists for rejecting infant baptism. As cited above, Article 34 declared, “Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of infants of believers . . .” But this sharp language shows that the Confession regards the rejection of infant baptism as a serious error, not as a heresy. Certainly the Confession does not state that a church which denies infant baptism is a false church.

If we conclude that at least some Baptist churches are true churches, does that mean that they are perfect churches or that we

may not criticize anything in their doctrine or practice? Not at all. We do not claim that true churches are perfect churches in doctrine or life. Churches in the Reformed and Presbyterian family of churches do not agree on all points and have been known to criticize one another. For example, some Reformed churches have only sung psalms while others have sung psalms and hymns. This difference has been serious and intensely debated. Each side in the debate has believed that its practice was more biblical than that of the other side, but has not led to the conclusion that either side was no longer a part of the true church.

In recognition of these realities the Westminster Confession of Faith (25.4) states that visible true churches

are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

The distinction between more pure and less pure true churches is not a distinction found in the Belgic Confession. But it is not a distinction rejected by the Belgic Confession, or incompatible with it. Not all truths are stated explicitly in the Confession.

Indeed, this distinction between more pure and less pure true churches is necessary for sound theology. If this distinction is rejected, we must say either that only one denomination and its practices manifest the true church or that all differences among true churches are matters of indifference. The former position is sectarian and the latter is latitudinarian. Neither is taught by any of the Reformed confessions or has ever been held by sound Reformed churches.

If the language of the Confession were pressed in such a radical way as to suggest that all Baptist churches are false churches, one would logically be forced by the language of the Confession to conclude that no Baptists are Christians. The Belgic Confession, Article 28, declares that “out of it [the true church] there is no salvation.” Does the Confession then force us to the conclusion that no Baptists are saved? Such a conclusion is absurd, unbiblical, and contrary to the explicit teaching of the Confession. Certainly there are Baptists that exhibit the marks of true Christians described in

Article 29.

In any case, the statement about no salvation outside the church was originally made by Cyprian in the ancient church period, and is cited by De Bres to demonstrate the importance of the church for the Reformed and the continuity of Reformed thought with the ancient church. This statement was certainly not meant absolutely. Christians had always recognized that the thief on the cross, although not baptized or a member of the church, had been saved. Also the Reformers believed that there were true Christians in the Roman church. We must not press the language of the Confession to theological conclusions not made or intended by the Confession itself.

In our eagerness to exalt and defend the truths and glories of Reformed Christianity we must avoid an arrogant or triumphalist confessionalism. We need to communicate clearly and charitably. We ought to seek to attract people to our biblical convictions and to give them time to grow into those convictions. To say that all Baptist churches are false churches is not consistent with our confession and is unnecessarily offensive. It is contrary to Christian charity and doctrinal consistency. Let us uphold the importance of the true church and of true Christianity without impugning the churches and Christianity of those Baptists with whom we recognize a common faith in so many ways.

Personally, I look forward to continuing to work with Dr. Renihan to advance the cause of Christ, and from time to time looking into the Scriptures with him to study the doctrine of baptism. Both of us want to reject all human inventions on the matter of baptism and both of us want to submit to the Bible's teaching alone. Only turning again and again to study the Bible on these matters will lead us to greater clarity and unity. And only in this return to his Word do we together honor our Christ.

The Belgic Confession and the True Church