

Life, Love, and Death as a Christian: The Reformed Pastor Guido de Brès

I invite you to let your eyes peer down the hallways of time and journey with me through the years all the way back to 1567. Let your feet follow mine, down these winding stairs. Here, I'll hold the torch high so you can see the way.

The air is damp. The smell is bad.

Are your eyes adjusting to the dark? Do you see two men, sitting over there, against the wall? Have you noticed that the door is locked behind us? That the company of forty soldiers outside prevents escape? Do you see the chains on their arms and the shackles on their legs?

A shaft of light is coming in. I see one of them holding an inkpot and paper while the other dips his quill. He is writing! Let's look over his shoulder and read what we can. It looks like it is quite long already.

The grace and mercy of our good God and heavenly Father, and the love of His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, be with you, my dearly beloved.

Catherine Ramon, my dear, beloved wife, and my sister in our Lord Jesus Christ: the fact that you feel anguish and sadness disturbs somewhat my joy and the happiness of my heart, so I am writing this for the consolation of both of us, and especially for your consolation, because it pleases the Lord to separate us from each other, and since you have always loved me with a heartfelt affection. I feel your sorrow over this separation more keenly than my own. I pray you not to be troubled too much over this, lest we offend our God. You knew when you married me that you were taking a mortal husband, who was uncertain of life even then, and yet it has pleased God to permit us to live together for seven years, giving us five precious children . . .

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Now remember that I did not fall into the hands of my enemies by mere chance, but through the providence of my God who controls and governs all things, the least as well as the greatest. This is shown by the words of Christ, "Be not afraid. Your very hairs are numbered. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them shall fall to the ground without the will of your heavenly Father. Then fear nothing. You are worth more than many sparrows." . . .

You should believe that it is for my good and for my peace. You have seen and felt my labours, cross, persecutions, and afflictions which I have endured, and have personally experienced them when you accompanied me in the travels of my exile. Now my God has extended his hand to receive me into his blessed kingdom. I shall see it before you and when it shall please the Lord, you will follow me. This separation is not for all time. The Lord will receive you also to join us together again in our head, Jesus Christ . . .

I pray you, my dearly beloved, to console yourself by meditating on these things. Consider the honour that God has done you, in giving you a husband who was not only a minister of the Son of God, but so esteemed of God that he allowed him to have the crown of martyrs. It is an honour the like of which God has never even given to the angels . . .

I am practicing now what I have preached to others. And I must confess that when I preached I would speak about the things I am now actually experiencing as a blind man speaks of colour. Since I was taken prisoner I have profited more and learned more than during all the rest of my life . . .

Our Lord permits me on the one hand to feel my weakness and my smallness, that I am but a small vessel on the earth, very fragile, to the end that he would humble me, so that all the glory of the victory may be given to him. On the other hand, he fortifies me and consoles

me in an unbelievable way. I have more comfort than the enemies of the gospel. I eat, drink and rest better than they do.

I am held in a very strong prison, very bleak, obscure and dark. The prison is known by the obscure name "Brunain." The air is poor and it stinks. On my feet and hands I have irons, big and heavy. They are a continual hell, hollowing my limbs up to my poor bones . . .

Farewell, Catherine, my dearly beloved . . . I pray that God has given me the grace to write for your benefit, in such a way that you may be consoled in this poor world. Keep my [poorly-written] letter as a remembrance of me. Continue your love for me by extending it all the more to our children. Remember God is the husband of poor widows and the father of poor orphans. He will never leave you – of that I can assure you. I will write my friends to care for you, but if means are lacking, then find some good man who fears God.

Commend me to my good mother. I hope to write some consolation to her, if it pleases God. Greet also my good sister. May she take her affliction to God. Grace be with you.

At the prison, April 12, 1567.

It looks like he is just signing off now . . .

Your faithful husband, Guido de Brès, minister of the Word of God at Valenciennes, and presently prisoner for the Son of God at the aforesaid place.¹

How had it come to this?

¹ Most of this letter is directly quoted, but here and there I added or moved a bit of material. To find a copy online, go to <http://ia600208.us.archive.org/19/items/BredenhofArticles1/AReformationMartyrComfortsHisWife.pdf>. Accessed 30 October 2017.

Guy de Brès, or, Guido de Brès was born in 1522 in what is now southern Belgium. John Calvin was then thirteen years old and Luther had posted his 95 theses some five years before. Change was happening. We know very little about Guido's childhood, except that while he was yet in the womb his mother deeply desired that her child be a son would preach the gospel.²

Guido travelled to Lausanne and Geneva to obtain the best theological education.³ Sometime in his late 20s he traveled to England and joined a congregation of refugees – Reformed believers who were welcomed by the young King Edward VI. He learned much here also. He could have stayed in England which was still at peace, or gone home and faced persecution. He chose the latter for the love of Christ and his fellow believers in southern Belgium. Ministering to the persecuted churches there, he never stayed in one place too long, often changed his name, sometimes grew his beard, sometimes trimmed it, and had different sets of clothing. All this to avoid capture. I found his name as author on only one of the several books and thousands of pages published in his lifetime.⁴

His dear Catharine Ramon must have been a courageous woman, for she married this man-without-an-earthly-home when he was 38 years old, in the midst of his dangerous ministry.

By the age of 39, in 1561, he had, in strict secrecy, finished a confession of faith that we call our beloved Belgic Confession. Because it was so scriptural and beautiful in its contents, many Reformed churches adopted it in the following years.

About this time the number of illegal Reformed believers had grown so large in Guido's city that they dared openly to sing the Genevan Psalms in

² This, and some other points of biography, were taken from Leonard Verduin, "Guido de Bres and the Anabaptists," in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35 (Oct 1961), 251–66.

³ Guido de Brès, *Procedures tenues à l'endroit de ceux de la religion du Pais-Bas* ([Geneva: Crespin], 1568), a6v.

⁴ As far as I have checked, all of the printed works of Guido de Brès published in his lifetime appeared without his name, except for, *La Racine, source et fondement des Anabaptistes* (Clemence, 1565).

the streets by night. A show of strength. Guido did not support this because he knew that the government would interpret this as an act of disobedience, even treason.

He was right. In his preface to the Belgic Confession he tried to overcome the danger by emphasizing that true believers prayed for and obeyed the government in all good things. He also wrote,

We are, it is alleged, disobedient rebels, intent only on the destruction of civil government, throwing the world into confusion and disorder, bent only on breaking free from your authority and power, indeed on snatching the sceptre from your hands . . . [People say of us: throw] the Christians to the lions!

But . . . the banishments, prisons, racks, exiles, tortures and countless other persecutions plainly demonstrate that our desire and conviction is not [to rule this earth], for we would lead a far easier life if we did not embrace . . . this doctrine. But having the fear of God before our eyes, and being in dread of the warning of Jesus Christ, who tells us that He shall forsake us before God and His Father if we deny Him before men, we suffer our backs to be beaten, our tongues to be cut, our mouths to be gagged and our whole bodies to be burnt [rather than deny the truth of this gospel].⁵

De Brès had written this preface in utmost secrecy and had it printed with the beloved confession. A copy was tossed over the castle wall, as a testimony to the government. But he kept his own identity as author a secret. He had also instructed one of his closest workers that if he, Guido, was caught, the back shed in which he had worked, and which contained copies of the confession, was to be burned up. But when the authorities were tipped off to find Guido, the man who was to torch his workshop

⁵ See <http://www.dutchrevolt.leiden.edu/english/sources/Pages/1561.aspx>. Accessed 30 October 2017.

failed, and the secret was out. Guido fled yet again, this time with his new wife, probably with their first baby as well.

He could not help but preach the gospel. He continued in many other important cities, in the French language. The church kept growing. So did his family – five precious children. So did the number of books he wrote to defend the church in her truth.

The year 1566 was called the year of wonder, when crowds of five and six thousand and more were gathering in fields every day for six or seven weeks to hear his preaching.⁶ God was granting conversions by the thousands. Praise the Lord! But this too attracted the authorities' attention. Finally, in 1567, he was captured and tossed in the hell hole of the Brunain prison, chained in its bowels, which indeed had the sewer flowing through them. From this prison, he wrote the letter with which we began.

The letter to his wife was written in April. A month later he was still alive, and being interrogated by an important Roman Catholic bishop.

Guido could accurately quote Scripture and many early church writers from memory. He was powerful in argument and never wavered from the truth. When the bishop charged Guido with preferring his own private judgment to that of the whole church, he replied that he was following the judgment of Scripture and of the early church, not this recent Roman Catholic Church, with all of its human traditions. Guido added that he would gladly celebrate the mass and transubstantiation *if* Jesus had indeed commanded it and it was biblical. The bishop, for his part, admitted that if he would follow his own private judgment, he would doubt the sacrifice of the mass. He added, "But, so what? Since the church has determined and settled the matter, one ought simply to believe it." In the bishop's view, the church formed and determined the Bible, but in our view, and in the

⁶ Guido de Brès, *Procedures tenues à l'endroit de ceux de la religion du Pais-Bas* ([Geneva: Crespin], 1568), a2v.

Bible's own view – which is God's view – the Bible is God's holy revelation, which alone must form and determine all that the church believes.⁷

In time, the Roman Catholic position was described as the coal miner's (collier's) faith, because here is what a coal miner once answered when he was asked what he believed. Answer: I believe what the church believes. Question: What does the church believe? Answer: The church believes what I believe. Question: Well, then, what is it that both you and the church believe? Answer: Why, we both believe the very same thing!

Here there is no longer any direct contact with the Word of God, no study of the Scriptures, no life for the church, but just a mindless following of what the priest says. Not so! Says the Lord, for you all are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. You all are called to know me, from the least to the greatest! My Holy Spirit is poured out upon all of you! Know my word! Find my church! Join it, and bend your necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, serving the edification of your brothers and sisters, as Guido de Brès, in his own Christ-like way, did for you (BC, art. 28).

On May 31, 1567, Guido and his colleague – the one who had held the paper and inkpot – were hung. They would have been burnt as heretics, but they were condemned first of all as treasonous, as disobeying the authorities and endangering their country. Being judged guilty of this particular crime entailed the sentence of hanging. Yet Guido de Brès's last words were an admonition from the scaffold to his people to obey the ordained authorities. How remarkable, coming from a man supposedly guilty of treason!

What can we learn from the life, love, and death of this faithful servant of the LORD? I have seven lessons:

⁷ The original French-language record of the debate between Bishop François Richardot and Guido de Brès can be found in the work referenced above in note 6. An English translation with an introduction and notes has been made by Wes Bredenhof. See, Wes Bredenhof, "De Brès versus Richardot: A Sixteenth-Century Debate Regarding the Lord's Supper," in *The Confessional Presbyterian* 6 (2010), 134–47.

1. To be committed to the truth of the gospel is worth more than your own earthly life.
2. Persecution is to be expected and can be endured by faith in Christ. Some of us will suffer. Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul! Fear nothing but God's judgment.
3. Even in the worst situation, God's Spirit will enable true believers to love others, as Guido de Brès loved his wife and children and church, including you and me.
4. The Belgic Confession is the work of one of Christ's faithful martyrs, and our treasure. His death sealed what we confess in it, that we have everything in Christ.
5. All believers are called to know the LORD personally, through his Word, and to aim for Christian maturity. He wants us to radiate Christ's name everywhere. Guido de Brès died because he refused to hide his faith.
6. God works all things together for the good of those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. Trust in the good providence of your God!
7. This school has been named in memory of one of God's faithful Reformation servants, to the glory of God. How astonished he would be to hear his name chanted at our sports events!