

## ***Guido de Brès and His Belief in Purgatory***

Wes Bredenhof

This year marks the 450th birthday of the Belgic Confession. As part of our ongoing celebration of this milestone in Reformed confessional history, let me share with you a little known fact about the author, Guido de Brès. He believed in purgatory.

This came out when he was in prison in Tournai in the last weeks of his life. He and another Reformed pastor (Peregrin de la Grange) were initially imprisoned there and then shortly afterwards transferred to Valenciennes. While awaiting transfer, de Brès and de la Grange were visited by many people. He had become a sort of celebrity. He wrote, "...I was visited by a large number of gentlemen, women, and young girls, who said that they wanted to see me because they had heard so much of Guy de Brès and had never seen him before."

Among those visitors was Monsieur de Moulbay, the commander of the Tournai castle where de Brès was imprisoned. He came looking to debate points of theology with the pastor. He and others first tried to argue with de Brès about the invocation of Mary and other saints. De Brès stumped them with quotations from Scripture and Augustine. Their next attack came with the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, Jesus' mother. De Brès affirmed that he believed that she was always and still is a virgin — not an uncommon position among sixteenth century Reformers. This answer surprised his accusers.

Then de Moulbay alleged that de Brès did not believe in purgatory. This was his response and the follow-up conversation as reported by de Brès:

"Pardon me, sir, I do not belong to those who deny a purgatory. For I hold the blood of the Son of God to be the purgatory of the sins of those who repent and embrace this benefit by faith. But I do not recognize the burning and roasting of souls as held by the fables of the priests." Then he answered me in anger, saying that I might as well deny that there is a hell. But I said that I held that there is a hell for the sinful and wicked, just as the Word of God teaches us, but that I did not hold to such a purgatory as the priests had invented because the Scriptures teach us nothing about it. Then they said that when I would be damned I would find out about hell. To which I responded to him that I have my Judge in heaven and he would judge altogether different — and concerning that I was confident because of his Word.

We read of nothing further between de Brès and de Moulbay. Immediately after this, de Brès and de la Grange were shipped out of Tournai on their way to Valenciennes. There the two Reformed pastors would be martyred for their faith.

### **Not An Original Method**

I got to thinking about de Brès and his "belief in purgatory," as I was recently reading a late medieval letter. Wessel Gansfort was a Dutch theologian who lived about a century before de

Brès. He was writing to Jacob Hoeck, another theologian. They had been arguing about the role of tradition and Scripture, specifically with regard to the issue of indulgences. Hoeck had asserted that the Bible said nothing for or against indulgences. Gansfort completely disagreed. He wrote,

In my opinion it was not the first Pope, Peter, but the Holy Spirit through Peter who issued the one and only permanent bull of indulgence. Peter testifies that this bull is permanent because it provides ample entrance into the kingdom of God and of our Saviour Jesus Christ. And Peter further testifies that the bull is the only one and adds, 'Whoever lacks these things [the ten things enumerated in 2 Peter 1] is blind and feeling his way by hand and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins.' Therefore no other bull is to be received or authorized which does not include this. Every other bull is superfluous and, therefore, Scripture does speak about indulgences, because it refers to ample entrance into the kingdom.

Gansfort was speaking about a different (but related) issue, but yet we find him using the same method as de Brès about a hundred years later: co-opting your opponent's terminology to score rhetorical points. Had de Brès read Gansfort? It's impossible to say. More likely, both Gansfort and de Brès were using a method of argument that had been developed by someone else in an earlier period. They knew that this method had power to persuade.

### **Purgatory in the Belgic Confession & Le Baston**

De Brès used this line of argumentation concerning purgatory elsewhere. His first major book was also his most popular. *Le baston de la foy chrestienne* (The Staff of the Christian Faith) appeared in 1558 and was a response to the most serious Roman Catholic theological errors. There is a chapter that deals with purgatory. De Brès first lists all the Scripture texts which refute the Roman Catholic doctrine. Then he begins presenting what the early church fathers taught. He provides straight quotations (in French) from Irenaeus, Jerome, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and most importantly, from Augustine. One of the quotes from Augustine comes from *The City of God* where he is interacting with the Platonist Porphyry. De Brès quotes Augustine noting that Porphyry, "refused to recognize that Christ is the Principle by whose incarnation we are purified." In the French translation given by de Brès the last part read, "*par l'incarnation duquel nous sommes purgez.*" In the margin next to this quotation, de Brès added a note, "Jesus Christ is our purgatory."

That leads us back to the Belgic Confession. There is nothing explicit in the Confession about purgatory. However, there are two places where de Brès implicitly rejects the Roman Catholic and affirms the Reformed version of purgatory.

The first comes in article 21, "The Satisfaction of Christ Our High Priest." De Brès wrote there of Christ "offering himself on the tree of the cross, where he poured out his precious blood to purge away our sins." In the original French we find "*la purification de nos pechez,*" literally: "the purification of our sins." But yet the thought is there of cleansing or purging and this is

reflected in later Latin renditions that used the word *purgatio*. Jesus Christ is our purgatory, according to article 21 of the Confession.

The second place is found in article 34, “The Sacrament of Baptism.” The Confession says that the blood of Christ, by the Holy Spirit, “washes and cleans our soul from sin.” Again, the exact word in French related to purgatory (*purger*) was not used in the original, but the thought is there. Both the thought and the word are found a little bit further when de Brès wrote of how Christ gives us what is signified in baptism. The first thing mentioned is that he “washes, purges, and cleanses our souls of all filth and unrighteousness.” Baptism is the sacrament that points us to the reality of Christ being our purgatory.

The Reformed version of purgatory is the biblical, comforting version. It speaks of the finished work of our Saviour as the only ground for our salvation. It speaks of Jesus Christ as the great High Priest who has done everything necessary to secure our well-being for today and into eternity. This was the firm conviction by which Guido de Brès lived and died. This is the firm conviction maintained by our Belgic Confession. Because it’s soundly biblical, it ought to continue to be ours *and* it should be shared, especially with those who still hold to the counterfeit doctrine.

\*\*\*\*\*

The account of Monsieur de Moulbay’s visit with de Brès is found in *Procedures tenues a l’endroit de ceux la religion du pais bas* (Geneva: Jean Crespin, 1568), 29-33. The quote from the letter of Wessel Gansfort can be found in *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought*, ed. H. A. Oberman (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966), 103. The quote from Augustine is found in *Le baston de la foy chrestienne* (Geneva: Nicolas Barbier & Courteau, 1558), 142.