

Martyrdom, Mission and the Belgic Confession

By Wes Bredenhof

INTRODUCTION

The question of the missiological relevance of the Belgic Confession is not a new one. In 1972, R. Recker concluded that “the Belgic Confession projects an image, in the main, of a church talking with itself rather than a church before the world.”¹ He went on to write:

If I were to construct a missiology today, or if I would hope to be inspired with missionary passion, I would reach for the Bible and not for the Belgic Confession. Reading this Confession with analytical care impressed me with the fact that it is partial. And when I read it to discern the missionary focus of the whole Word of God, then I can only say it is inadequate (Recker, 180).

Recker is not alone in his assessment. In the process leading up to the “Contemporary Testimony: Our World Belongs to God,” many voices were heard in the Christian Reformed Church arguing that the Three Forms of Unity (including the Belgic Confession) insufficiently addressed the mission of the church.² Up till now, the judgments made on the missiological relevance of the Belgic Confession have been almost unanimously negative.

It must be said that Recker and others have taken the historical context of the Confession into account when reasoning towards their judgments. The context is used mostly to excuse or otherwise explain the supposed lack of mission-focus. Rightly or wrongly, many contemporary missiologists and church historians see the Reformation in general as a movement lacking in missionary zeal and character.³ Therefore, we would also expect the confessional documents of the Reformation to reflect that lack of zeal.

My contention is that past judgments on the missiological relevance of the Belgic Confession, while dealing

with the historical context to a certain degree, have not done it full justice. In particular, a certain way of looking at the Reformation in its relation to mission appears to have clouded past judgments. In more recent times, new scholarship is bringing a fresh and more accurate contextual understanding of the Reformation, particularly of how the Reformers viewed themselves.⁴ This new scholarship impacts our assessment of the Reformation and mission and consequently also our assessment of the confessional documents of the Reformation.

The time is therefore right for a renewed evaluation of the Belgic Confession and its significance for missions and mission studies. I intend to carry out this evaluation within the framework of the historical context of persecution and martyrdom. Among the Three Forms of Unity, this context is entirely unique. The other confessions were borne out of completely different

THE AUTHOR: Wesley Lloyd Bredenhof is co-pastor of the Langley Canadian Reformed Church, in Langley, British Columbia. He is an instructor in the missions department at Reformation International Theological Seminary in Fellsmere, Florida, where he is also pursuing a Doctor of Theology degree. Mr. Bredenhof has written numerous articles for a wide variety of publications including *Clarion*, *Christian Renewal*, *Reformed Perspective*, *Koinonia* and *Mid-America Journal of Theology*.

1. “An Analysis of the Belgic Confession As To Its Mission Focus,” R. Recker, *Calvin Theological Journal* 7.2 (November 1972) 179.

2. Cf. “Supplement: Report 38,” *Acts of Synod 1972*, 403. A survey was distributed to each consistory of the CRC. Of the 135 churches (of 367) who said that it was necessary for the CRC to augment its confessions, 90 said that it was urgent to augment the confessions in the area of the mission of the church while 45 stated that it was desirable—only 7 said that it was unnecessary.

3. For a recent example, see *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey*, A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, Gary B. McGee (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 120–121.

4. Cf. *Recultivating the Vineyard: the Reformation Agendas of Christianization*, Scott H. Hendrix (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004); “Were the Reformers indifferent to missions?,” Hans-Werner Gensichen, *Verbum SVD* 25.1 (1984) 3–10.

circumstances that may or may not have their own bearing on their missiological significance. Persecution and suffering molded the Belgic Confession and should also mold how we understand its relevance for mission.

MARTYRDOM AND PERSECUTION IN SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

Martyrdom and persecution have to be carefully defined. Especially with the word “martyrdom” (and its cognates) the word can have slightly different nuances depending on the historical context. Our English word “martyr” is, of course, derived from the Greek *μαρτυς*. It has a historical development which will be helpful to outline briefly.

μαρτυς and its cognate forms (especially *μαρτυρεω* and *μαρτυρια*) were originally used in secular Greek in a two-fold way. It either denoted an eyewitness to an event or it could be used to “describe a witness to the facts in the legal sphere.”⁵ Much the same usage was found in the Septuagint, although the latter meaning was definitely coming into the fore. We also find this meaning on a number of occasions in the New Testament. Both *μαρτυς* and *μαρτυρεω* are used in several contexts with a legal connotation, directing readers to the idea of a courtroom.⁶ This courtroom has God as judge and various witnesses, including Christ and the apostles, are present to testify against the accused. It is this usage we find in the Lukan versions of the Great Commission in the gospel (Luke 24:48) and the Acts (1:8). However, these words can also be used in a less concrete way to refer to those who have seen or heard something and are simply reporting the truths of what they saw. This is the usage most often applied to the apostles.

In the New Testament there is also a development towards these terms referring to one who dies for his faith. We find such a usage in Acts 22:20 where Stephen is referred to as a martyr. The term *μαρτυς* is also used in this way in Revelation 17:6. In that passage, Scripture speaks of “the blood of the martyrs of Jesus”—a clear reference to those who have died for their faith. However, on these usages, Strathmann makes this

cautionary comment: “Not every committed Christian who dies for his faith is called *μαρτυς*. The name is reserved for those who are at work as evangelical witnesses... The name is reserved for those who prove the final seriousness of their witness by suffering death” (TDNT 4:495).

Moving along chronologically past the New Testament, we find that the word group moves more in the direction of one who suffers death because of his witness. This increasingly happens until the two are basically identified in patristic Greek and, through the use of the church, into Latin as *martyr*.⁷ Strathmann notes that *the Martyrdom of Polycarp* is the first work to have all the words of this group found with the “fixed martyrological sense” (TDNT, 4:505). By the middle of the second century, this usage became firmly established, particularly through the experiences of the church in Asia Minor (TDNT, 4:506).

As already noted, the word group passed into ecclesiastical Latin, most likely through the influence of the Vulgate. Via Latin, we find the word “martyr” appearing in numerous other European languages, including English. Its earliest appearance in English is traced to circa 900 in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* and a reference to St. Alban, the first British martyr. The sense is clearly that of the “fixed martyrological” variety. With the passage of time, OED notes that “the events of the Reformation caused the word to be popularly associated esp. with death by fire.”⁸

By way of conclusion, in its original sense *μαρτυς* and its cognates initially referred to the act of witnessing in a trial. This sense receives some weight in the New Testament as well. Most of the usages refer to a simple act of observing either by sight or by sound. However, it came also to refer to the act of witnessing to the truth of something through suffering and especially death. As we noted, this sense is also found in the New Testament, but it comes to fuller expression in later times in patristic Greek, ecclesiastical Latin and then in all European languages.

The concept of persecution also receives attention in the Scriptures. Among other places, the verb *διωκω* is used by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5 with respect to the covenant people. In verse 10, he speaks in one of the Beatitudes of those who “are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” In verses 11 and 12, he notes that this persecution is the same pattern as that experienced by the Old Testament prophets. In verse 44, he encourages his followers to pray for those who persecute them. In John 15:20, the Lord Jesus notes that if his enemies persecuted him, they will also persecute his followers.

5. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 4:476. Hereafter TDNT.

6. Cf. Matthew 18:16, 26:65, John 8:12–20, 1 Timothy 5:19, 6:12, 1 Peter 5:1, etc.

7. From what I can tell, the word was not used in classical Latin. I did a concordance search with the Vulgate and could only find the word used in the passage from Revelation 17:6.

8. Oxford English Dictionary (New York: OUP, 1971), *sub* martyr.

Being a follower of the Lord Jesus and facing persecution are often associated in the New Testament. The Lord warns his followers repeatedly that they will face stiff opposition.

If we attempt to define it, persecution is simply the pattern of opposition faced by the Lord Jesus in his earthly ministry. This pattern of opposition is re-enacted in the lives of his disciples then and now. This pattern involves attacks, subtle and not so subtle. When we look to what the Lord experienced, then we are reminded that persecution includes the various forms of suffering.

This overview of the history of the concepts of martyrdom and persecution gives us some helpful background as we begin looking at the relationship between the Belgic Confession and mission. In any case, the Belgic Confession cannot be properly understood apart from its original intent and context. However, it remains necessary first to give ample attention to the question of the relationship between martyrdom/persecution and missions.

MARTYRDOM AND MISSION

The connection between martyrdom and mission has not been explored in any great depth. There have been several recent examinations of the phenomenon of martyrdom in general, but these do not explore any possible correlation with mission. For instance, the book *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology and Politics of Self-Sacrifice* does not even mention the concept of mission. In the chapter on “the Theology of Martyrdom,” only the Jewish and Islamic conceptions of martyrdom are explored theologically.⁹ Lacey Baldwin Smith’s *Fools, Martyrs, Traitors* traces the concept of martyrdom in a very general way. Christian martyrdom is considered, but not as a phenomenon related in any way to mission.¹⁰ Finally, a recent anthology of writings related to martyrdom also considers the Christian variety but does not provide any direction on a possible relationship to the missionary enterprise.¹¹

Historically, Christian writers, while writing a lot about martyrdom, have not really written about martyrdom as a phenomenon of mission. One of the earliest examples of someone who did is the church father Tertullian. In his most important writing, *The Apology*, Tertullian provided a defense of the Christian faith to the provincial governors of the Roman Empire. Towards the end of the document, Tertullian makes the memorable statement “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”¹² Now it is true that there is some variation in

how these words are translated in the different English editions. Many translators felt compelled to add some words to explain what the seed is going to produce: faith, a greater harvest, the church or a new life. Regardless, the context makes it clear enough. Tertullian believed that God uses martyrdom and persecution in some mysterious way to cause the Christian faith to grow in strength and numbers.

In more modern times, martyrdom has mostly received attention as an historical phenomenon. This is especially true in missiological circles. Missiologists give some attention to martyrdom, but mostly because so many missionaries were martyred. The histories of mission are filled with accounts of suffering and blood shed unto death for the faith. But yet this aspect of mission does not receive as much attention as it deserves. A survey of leading missions textbooks from different backgrounds illustrates that martyrdom is usually considered by missiologists to be a mere historical fact rather than a component or facet of the Christian mission worthy of deeper thought and reflection.¹³ This lacuna led missiologist William D. Taylor to reflect in his closing address at the Iguassu Consultation, “How can the church around the world best prepare to grapple with the increasing waves of persecution and suffering? What does it mean to be the global body of Christ in these contexts? Where is our theology of martyrdom?”¹⁴

9. *Martyrdom: the Psychology, Theology and Politics of Self-Sacrifice*, Rona M. Fields, ed. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004).

10. *Fools, Martyrs, Traitors: the Story of Martyrdom in the Western World*, Lacey Baldwin Smith (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

11. *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*, Jan Willem Van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie (London: Routledge, 2002).

12. “*Plures effimur quotiens metimur a vobis; semen est sanguis Christianorum.*” *Apol.* 50.13. (accessed at www.tertullian.org/latin/apologeticus.htm on February 13, 2008); the English translation is from the Ante-Nicene Fathers.

13. *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* by J.H. Bavinck (Philippsburg: P & R, 1960) does not appear to have any discussion apart from mentions of the historical fact of martyrdom. Paul J. Visser (*Heart for the Gospel, Heart for the World: The Life and Thought of a Reformed Pioneer Missiologist, Johan Herman Bavinck [1895-1964]*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003) likewise makes no mention of martyrdom in the missiological thought of Bavinck. While noting that “Mission never has progressed without suffering and martyrdom,” (p.146) Moreau, Corwin, and McGee also essentially treat martyrdom as an historical phenomenon (*Introducing World Missions*). David J. Bosch in his treatment of “Luke’s missionary paradigm” follows the same trajectory, “... mission, of necessity, encounters *adversity and suffering.*” (*Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991) 121-122).

14. “Drawing to a close: inviting reflective, passionate, and globalized practitioners,” William D. Taylor, in *Global Missiology for the 21st*

Kevin Vanhoozer

Let us now look at two recent authors who have made efforts at setting forth something of a “theology of martyrdom” in connection with mission.¹⁵ Kevin Vanhoozer takes a specialized approach to the subject, looking at mission and martyrdom in connection with “the epistemology of the cross.” This fits with the theme of the book in which his essay is found: *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*.

Vanhoozer begins with a recognition of the dual sense of the word “martyr.” On the one hand, it refers to “giving witness,” and on the other hand to a “giving one’s life for the truth.” He wants to argue that martyrdom is the ultimate *sine qua non* for staking a theological truth claim. It is this, he contends, because it “ultimately communicates truth claims about the way of wisdom.” In turn, the witness of a martyr speaks to the postmodernist critiques of “traditional modes of justification,” as well as to the typically postmodern coldness towards the very notion of truth.¹⁶ We should note at this point that Vanhoozer’s introduction of a response to postmodernism does indicate his intent to speak to the contemporary situation. Whether or not this is relevant for our investigation of the Belgic Confession is something that deserves further research.

Vanhoozer “reclaims” the category of martyr in its dual sense of witnessing and suffering. He then defines witnessing: “*Witnessing is the way to put others in the position of coming to know (i.e. to believe and to understand) evangelical truth.*”¹⁷ This definition is not incompatible with the definition developed previously in this study from Scripture. In fact, this definition also characterizes the relationship between witnessing

(martyrdom) and mission; witnessing is an instrument by which mission is executed.

Further on, Vanhoozer develops the relationship between discipleship and suffering. He notes that suffering follows on the heels of discipleship. In fact, he argues, the truth is bound to suffer. Disciples do not seek suffering, but they inevitably face it because the world persecutes the truth. The cross of Christ illustrates the reality of this. Vanhoozer goes on to ask, “Why should this be so? Because the truth is ultimately not of this world. It is eschatological, not immanent, and cannot be contained within a worldly framework.... Those who stake theological truth claims, then, should not oppress, but rather suffer oppression” (147–148). This last statement particularly applies to imperialistic and colonial paradigms of mission. In other words, the relationship between discipleship and suffering/martyrdom implies that mission can never be done in an oppressive fashion, imposing truth on those who do not believe and do not wish to believe. As we shall see, this consideration is extremely relevant as we consider the missiological significance of the Belgic Confession in its historical context.

Vanhoozer parses the revelatory character of martyrdom by noting that “Martyrdom can be a powerful form of truth-disclosing action” (148). Martyrs for the Christian faith disclose the truth about God’s love and Jesus Christ’s Lordship. When a Christian martyr suffers and dies, he speaks volumes about these convictions which are foundational for the Christian life. Martyrdom discloses these truths in a powerful way. I would hasten to add that martyrdom, by itself, does not do this. Martyrdom accompanied by the witness of words is what is effective. A silent martyr is no real martyr and does not really disclose any truth about God’s love and Christ’s Lordship. Vanhoozer does go on to recognize that “speaking the truth in love is tied up with bearing witness” (149). It is important to emphasize that, just as in all aspects of Christian mission, word and deed belong together in martyrdom.

Of course, people have been martyred for a variety of causes throughout world history. Some of them were overtly religious, others political, and others philosophical. Vanhoozer compares the death of Socrates with the death of Jesus. At 70 years of age, the Greek philosopher was put on trial for corrupting the youth of Athens and for refusing to recognize the gods of the state. Socrates was found guilty and sentenced to drink poison hemlock. Vanhoozer concludes that, unlike Jesus, Socrates was merely half a martyr. He died the death of a misunderstood genius, but not the death of a witness and

Century: the Iguassu Dialogue, William D. Taylor ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001) 552.

15. Other treatments (of varying helpfulness) include “The Problem of Martyrdom in Missionary Countries,” Georg Evers in *Rethinking Martyrdom—Concilium 2003/1*, Teresa Okure, Jon Sobrino, and Felix Wilfred eds. (London: SCM Press: 2003) 87–95; “Das Martyrium in der Mission,” Hans von Campenhausen in *Kirchengeschichte als Missionsgeschichte Band I: Die Alte Kirche*, Heinzgunter Frohnes and Uwe W. Knorr eds. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1974) 71–85; “Mission as Call to Metanoia and Witness to Hope: A Historical Survey,” Andras Koranyi, in *International Review of Mission* 88 (July 1999) 267–279; “Perseverance Through Suffering: A Spirituality for Mission,” Dirk van der Merwe, in *Missionalia* 33.2 (August 2005) 329–354.

16. “The Trials of Truth: Mission, Martyrdom and the Epistemology of the Cross,” Kevin J. Vanhoozer in *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*, J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999) 134.

17. Vanhoozer, 138—italics are the author’s.

certainly not the death of an apostle for some cause. According to Vanhoozer, Socrates “dies for a question, not an answer” (152–153). Consequently, we can make a judgment on the value of Socrates’ truth claims. Socrates did not testify to hope, but to open-ended uncertainty. Christian martyrs, following in the steps of their Master, are entirely different—they testify “in concrete terms to hope” (Vanhoozer, 155.). This leads Vanhoozer to conclude that “Witnessing is the epistemologically correct way of staking a theological truth claim” (156).

Vanhoozer’s analysis is valuable, for it lays out the correlation between the suffering Christ and the suffering Christian. As the Christ sends out his people (mission), they can expect to face suffering as their Master did. Their suffering and martyrdom says something powerful about the truth for which they stand. However, if there is one gap in Vanhoozer’s discussion it is the reality that competing Christian traditions have often persecuted one another. Given that fact, is it always the case that truth is on the side of the oppressed? He comes close to this point when he writes that those who make theological truth claims should not oppress, but rather suffer oppression. Nevertheless, he does not draw this out into a theoretical framework or in a concrete church-historical context. We will do this a bit further on in this paper.

John Piper

Another writer who parses the connection between martyrdom/suffering and mission is John Piper. His popular book *Let the Nations Be Glad* has a chapter on “The Supremacy of God in Missions through Suffering.”¹⁸ Piper begins with a reference to Matthew 13: 44 in which the Lord Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a treasure hidden in a field. “When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had, and bought the field.” In this similitude, Piper sees the worth that this man puts on the treasure of God. It is worth a great sacrifice and gives a deep joy. Says Piper, “Loss and suffering, joyfully accepted for the kingdom of God, show the supremacy of God more clearly in the world than all worship and prayer.... This is why the stories of missionaries who gladly gave their all have made God more real and precious to many of us” (Piper, 71). Throughout this chapter, Piper gives concrete examples of such missionaries. However, our interest is more in the lines that Piper draws between martyrdom/suffering and mission.

He notes that the calling of every believer is to experience some suffering, but those called to bear the gospel

to the unreached can especially expect this. For whatever reason, Piper does not fully draw out this thought but moves right away to the general passages (Mark 8: 34–35, Luke 14:33,26, and John 12:25) which quote the Lord Jesus speaking about taking up the cross and hating or losing one’s own life. These passages sufficiently prove his assertion about the calling of every believer, but do not provide any basis for arguing that it is especially missionaries who can expect to suffer. However, this can be supported from other passages that Piper mentions later on. At this point, Piper does prove the case that the Christian life in general is one of taking up the cross and suffering loss for the gospel.

Piper goes on to note that any discussion about martyrdom is dangerous because of the ascendancy of a certain variety of terrorism in the 21st century. As Vanhoozer did with Socrates and Jesus, he gives a comparison between terrorist “martyrs” and Christian martyrs. This comparison speaks quite pointedly to our discussion. Piper writes, “First, the life of a Christian martyr is taken by those whom he wants to save. He does not fall on his own sword, and does not use it against his adversary” (Piper, 74). Taken as a rule, this may be true. However, one could envision a situation where one’s life is taken by one already saved. Granted, these situations may be rare, but it is not impossible. Nevertheless, it is a valid point that in *many* instances of Christian martyrdom, the ones who are carrying out the violence would not claim to be regenerated. Conscientious and faithful believers would naturally desire the salvation of their oppressors—a missionary impulse, one could say.

Piper’s second point regards the aim of martyrs and their method: “...Christian martyrs do not pursue death; they pursue love. Christians do not advance the gospel of Christ by the use of the sword” (Piper, 74–75). He follows this up with appropriate references to several Scripture passages.¹⁹ The important thing here is that the gospel advances by a certain approach that is non-violent and does not involve the shedding of blood. Piper maintains that Christianity advances “by suffering to bring life, not suffering to cause death” (Piper, 75). This is close to Vanhoozer’s position that those who make theological truth claims should not oppress, but be oppressed.

From here, Piper proceeds to draw out in more detail the implications that follow from the believer’s union with Christ. He mentions the passages that speak of

18. *Let the Nations Be Glad: the Supremacy of God in Missions* (Second Edition, Revised and Expanded), John Piper (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 71–107.

19. Matthew 26:52, John 18:36, Mark 10:45, and Colossians 1:24.

the believer having being crucified with Christ and notes that this does involve a spiritual transaction, but there is more involved.²⁰ Piper asserts that “the point of this spiritual death is not that it takes the place of a real, practical application of Jesus’ teaching to physical suffering and death but that it makes that application possible” (Piper, 76). In this way, Christ’s suffering and death are appropriated in the life of the believer in the fullest possible manner. Piper develops this further when he points to Christ’s words in John 15:20, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.” 1 Peter 2:20–21 establishes Christ’s suffering and death both as a substitution and a pattern for believers to follow. Piper draws out the same thought with a slightly different nuance from Hebrews 13:12–14, a passage which speaks about believers going to the Christ who suffers outside the gate, bearing the reproach which he endured. Piper writes,

This is above all a missionary text. Outside the camp means outside the borders of safety and comfort. Outside the camp are the ‘other sheep’ that are not of this fold. Outside the camp are the unreached nations. Outside the camp are the places and the people who will be costly to reach and will require no small sacrifice. But to this we are called: ‘Let us go and bear the reproach he endured.’ It is our vocation (Piper, 80).

Thus, union with Christ and the pattern he set for us figures prominently in Piper’s reflections. He fills this out with more concrete examples, including incidents in the life of the Apostle Paul.

Piper moves on to consider the question of whether or not God allows or appoints this suffering to take place. Based on such passages as Philippians 1:29, Piper answers that it is indeed God’s appointment for his people: “The suffering that missionaries meet is not something unforeseen by the Lord. He saw it clearly, embraced it for himself, and sent his disciples into the same danger” (Piper, 85). The question is: why? Piper gives six reasons.

First, he argues that, in the Biblical perspective, suffering gives a greater depth to faith and holiness. This argument is easy enough to support with reference to Biblical passages such as 2 Cor.1:8–9.

The second reason is “suffering makes your cup

20. The passages he mentions are Galatians 5:24, Galatians 2:19–20, Romans 6:6, and Colossians 3:2–3.

21. He discusses passages such as 2 Corinthians 4:17–18, Romans 8:18, and Matthew 5:11–12. He also gives a lengthy quotation from Jonathan Edwards on this matter. Cf. *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 88–89.

increase.” By this, Piper means to say that when we endure suffering on earth, we can expect a greater reward of God’s glory in heaven. Because of the controversial nature of the claim that there are varying degrees of reward in heaven, Piper exerts some effort to lay it out Biblically. His appeals to Scripture and the accompanying interpretations are convincing and lie within the pale of orthodoxy.²¹

Third, he argues that the suffering of missionaries is something that God uses to encourage others who might be timid or otherwise lethargic. He makes a reference to Paul’s words in Philippians 1:14 that God used his imprisonment and suffering to embolden the other believers.

Piper’s fourth reason is captured with Paul’s words in Colossians 1:24, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” Piper explains that this does not refer to any lack in the substitutionary atonement of Christ, rather it points to the fact that Christ’s sufferings “are not known and felt by people who were not at the cross” (Piper, 92). Through the suffering of the body of Christ, unbelievers are confronted with the suffering of Christ himself.

Fifth, Piper asserts that “suffering enforces the missionary command to go.” When the church suffers, her outreach is extended to places where she might not otherwise go. “If you see things with the eyes of God, the Master strategist, what you see in every setback is the positioning of troops for a greater advance and a greater display of his wisdom, power, and love” (Piper, 94). Piper refers to two passages in Acts that affirm this perspective, Acts 8:1 and Acts 11:19. In these passages we read about the persecution which began after the martyrdom of Stephen and how this resulted in the church being spread to such places as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. This gets developed further when we discover from Scripture that “Jesus told the disciples to expect arrest and imprisonment as God’s deployment tactic to put them with people they would never otherwise reach” (Piper, 96). Indeed, Luke 21:13 very explicitly says, “This will result in your being witnesses to them.”

Finally, Piper maintains that it is in the suffering of believers that Christ’s supremacy is made manifest. When believers suffer and die for their faith, they demonstrate in a very concrete way that Christ is of inestimable value to them. They witness to the supremacy of God’s worth. In fact, says Piper, this is “the reason for suffering running through and above all the other reasons. God ordains suffering because through all the

other reasons it displays to the world the supremacy of his worth above all treasures” (Piper, 99).

Piper’s discussion of this subject is comprehensive and grounded firmly in exegesis of the Scriptures and therefore extremely helpful. Vanhoozer presents a theological/philosophical approach to the relation between martyrdom and mission, whereas Piper is more interested in providing a direct summary of Scriptural teaching. Vanhoozer works with the concept of martyrdom extensively, while Piper focuses on the broader category of persecution/suffering. In the remainder of this section, I will attempt to provide a synthesis of their approaches while adding some other insights.

MISSIOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF MARTYRDOM AND SUFFERING

The origin of the mission of the New Testament church rests with the command of the Lord Jesus to his apostles in Matthew 28:16–20 and the parallel passages.²² The Lord Jesus was sent into this world as the Redeemer and he in turn sends out his followers (John 20:21). The New Testament is amply clear that these followers stand in a special relationship to their Lord. The New Testament Scriptures describe this relationship succinctly with the expression “in Christ” (ἐν Χριστῷ) and similar expressions.

The missiological foundation of martyrdom and suffering is to be found in this union with Christ the sender. Jesus Christ was the “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). His entire life on earth was characterized by suffering. The paradigm of attaining glory through suffering finds its archetype with him. While believers are on earth, because of and through their mystical union with him, they share in his sufferings with the hope of glory to come. Naturally, they do this in a limited way, for the sufferings of Christ and particularly his experience of God’s wrath were unique. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which believers can and sometimes do share the sufferings of their Lord (cf. Philippians 3:10).

Vanhoozer comes closest to incorporating this when he speaks about believers following in the steps of Jesus their Master. As their Master who sends them out experienced suffering, so also his people can expect the same. However, Vanhoozer does not develop the thought to any significant degree, leaving the matter at more of the level of an example than of something rooted in a mystical union. To be sure, there is a level at which the Lord Jesus left his followers an example to be followed, also when it comes to his suffering (1 Peter 2:21). However,

this level is also incorporated into the union with Christ. Those who are “in Christ,” look to his example to discover what it means to live as those who are “in Christ.” The example is the means by which the union is realized in day-to-day living. So, also with the example of the sufferings of the Lord Jesus, they become a part of the missiological foundation of believers’ suffering and martyrdom through the mystical union.

Of course, John Piper is much more explicit on this matter of the union with Christ. Piper ties it initially into the death of the old nature and the coming to life of the new. He says that it is because we share in Christ’s resurrection and victory over death that we can in turn take risks, suffer pain, and even die a martyr’s death (Piper, 76). Like Vanhoozer, Piper also speaks of the example or pattern of Christ’s sufferings in such passages as 1 Peter 2. However, he could have strengthened his point by tying it into the believers’ union with Christ.

Without Christ and his suffering, Christians would never suffer. Had Christ never sent out his apostles with the gospel, Christians would not suffer for their faith. Apart from their union with the Christ who suffered in his ministry on earth, believers would not and indeed could not suffer even to the point of dying for their faith. One cannot help but think of the words of Revelation 14:13a, “Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die *in the Lord* from now on” (italics added).

MISSIOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF MARTYRDOM AND SUFFERING

As others have noted (especially Vanhoozer), the phenomena of martyrdom and suffering communicate a message. The message is being communicated by the one who suffers to the one who causes the suffering (and to others who may witness it as well). The message consists of at least three parts.

First of all, it is a message about the one who suffers. The martyr communicates that he or she is so firmly rooted in the faith that apostasy is not an option. Is this a testimony to truth, as Vanhoozer claims? We can distinguish between two senses. In the broad

22. Cf. my “What is Mission?”—unpublished paper available at [www.telus.net/wbreden/hof/What is Mission.pdf](http://www.telus.net/wbreden/hof/What%20is%20Mission.pdf). Within the context of this paper, it should be noted that, although it came to greater prominence during and after the time of William Carey, this text was already noted for its missionary significance in the time of the Reformation and shortly thereafter. Cf. Bosch, *op.cit.*, p.340. Contra *Pentecost and Missions*, Harry R. Boer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 18–20.

sense, those who suffer for Christian faith demonstrate a commitment to the absolute nature of truth. They realize that Christian faith is not grounded in relativism. This is absolutely true and martyrs of every Christian tradition communicate this message—one which obviously carries great missiological import. Nevertheless, there is a narrow sense in which some Christian martyrs were firmly convinced of the truth, but yet were wrong. We think particularly here of Anabaptist and Roman Catholic martyrs. They died for their commitment to certain doctrines which cannot be supported from Scripture.

Second, there is a message about the one who causes the suffering. Historically speaking, persecution and martyrdom have come from two directions. First from the unbelieving world and then second from those who call themselves followers of the Lord Jesus. To the first group, martyrdom communicates the radical antithesis between faith and unbelief. Unbelief is without an apologetic (Romans 1:20) and so it sometimes resorts to blunt force. In this sense, martyrdom and persecution tell us something about the desperation of unbelief. Things become more complicated when Christian believers are on both the giving and receiving end of persecution and martyrdom. In such a situation, the reality of persecution and martyrdom may reveal something about the real spiritual condition of the persecutors. Will those who truly have union with Christ persecute and oppress others? It hardly seems possible. On the other hand, perhaps there have been regenerate persecutors. In such cases, persecution and martyrdom communicates something about the maturity and consistency of their commitment to Christ. Even this may not be satisfactory for every situation. Venturing outside the realm of theory places one in the real world where people and their motivations are complex and cannot always be fully explained.

Finally, martyrdom and suffering communicate something about the one for whom believers suffer. Their tribulations reveal the message of the cross. In some sense, martyrs share in the sufferings of Christ and portray them to the world. Where words lose their edge and meaning, the graphic picture of believers suffering for Christ can be a powerful missionary message.

23. Cf. Koranyi, *op.cit.*; “God’s Gift of Martyrdom: The Early Reformation Understanding of Dying for the Faith,” Robert Kolb in *Church History* 64.3 (September 1995) 399–412.

24. Cf. “Telos, Chronos and Hermeneia: The Role of Metanarrative in Leadership Effectiveness through the Production of Meaning,” Justin A. Irving and Karin Klenke, in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 3 (3) (September 2004) 5.

Missiological Result of Martyrdom and Suffering

Martyrdom and suffering have an impact on the execution of the church’s missionary task. As noted earlier, this was recognized already by Tertullian. There are two particular ways in which we can draw this out. First of all, speaking historically, martyrdom and suffering have usually resulted in the growth of the church. This growth has been both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Whether during the history of the early church, during the days of the Great Reformation, or during contemporary persecutions in Asia, the church has often appeared to grow numerically during times of persecution.²³ Moreover, although this is a more subjective aspect, the church also grows in maturity and commitment through persecution. Believers hunger for the Word of God and those whose commitment is less than whole-hearted tend to fall away in the face of suffering. As Piper noted from Phil. 1:14, persecution strengthens God’s people. It prepares and equips them to be God’s instruments to continue reaching out to the lost.

All of this serves for the ultimate result: the glory of God. As John Piper emphasizes, the whole enterprise of Christian mission is pointed in the one direction of the glory of God. “Missions exist because worship doesn’t” (Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 17). Worship is about God’s glory. When believers suffer death and physical pain for their faith, other believers are led to call upon God. They ask for deliverance but they also give him glory and praise for strengthening his people. They give him glory when they see how the suffering of the church results in the advance of God’s kingdom. They worship the God who sovereignly controls history and will bring it to its glorious end, doing so also through the sufferings of his people.

MARTYRDOM AS METANARRATIVE FOR THE BELGIC CONFESSION

Having laid out the framework, we can move ahead to consider the connection between martyrdom and the Belgic Confession. I propose to do this under the rubric of martyrdom as a metanarrative for this document. I am using the word “metanarrative” in the sense of a dominant theme that can be put in a narrative form. Metanarrative is thus more specialized than context. Both metanarrative and context are tools by which historians can draw meaning out of the past, but metanarrative is more oriented towards an integrative and diachronic accounting of the facts.²⁴

Though debated in years gone by, the authorship of the Belgic Confession has now been definitively established. N.H. Gootjes has conclusively demonstrated from early correspondence that Guido (or Guy) de Brès wrote the original text of the Confession in 1561.²⁵ That information gives us a starting place for our development of this metanarrative of martyrdom.

It is generally recognized that de Brès relied quite heavily on other confessional writings, particularly the so-called Gallican (French) Confession of 1559. In some instances, the wording of de Brès' confession is very similar to these earlier works, especially to the Gallican. However, among the significant differences between the Belgic and the Gallican confessions is the emphasis in the Belgic on persecution and martyrdom. De Brès' language on this count is entirely original. Among the articles on the church, for instance, the Gallican does not explicitly mention the false church or its persecution of the godly. Furthermore, the Gallican Confession does not have an article regarding eschatology. Finally, even in the introductory letter of the Gallican, while persecutions are acknowledged, they do not receive the same emphasis as in the work of de Brès. Insofar as this goes, the Belgic Confession is *sui generis*. There is no Reformation confession as oriented to this subject as the work of de Brès.

Guido de Brès was born in 1522, a native of Mons in the present-day region of southwestern Belgium. He was the fourth son of devout Roman Catholic parents. Owing especially to the influence of his mother, the environment of his upbringing was profoundly religious.²⁶ Through what appears to have been a drawn-out process of reflection and careful consideration, de Brès was converted to the Reformed faith in 1547 (*Guy de Brès*, 40–41). This was no small matter. De Brès lived in the Low Countries, the same area which William Monter tells us was the “epicentre of heresy executions in Europe” since the 1530s.²⁷ According to Alastair Duke, the distinctive feature of the Reformation in the Low Countries was persecution.²⁸ One can be sure that the author of the Belgic Confession had counted the cost before making the commitment to be Reformed. He was deeply aware that martyrdom was a real possibility for him, as it was for other Reformed believers of his era.²⁹

Following his conversion, it appears that de Brès may have done evangelistic work in his hometown (*Guy de Brès*, 42). However, persecution made the life of Reformed believers in this area very difficult. As a result, in 1548, one year after his conversion, de Brès fled to England (*Guy de Brès*, 40–41, 48). While in London, de Brès provided assistance to other exiles, including

the Polish Reformer John a Lasco. He also developed a sense of calling to the ministry and received some training to that end (40–41, 59). De Brès remained in England for five years, a time in which he grew as a Reformed believer, but also a time in which the atmosphere of persecution elsewhere in Europe could not be forgotten.

In 1552, the tide turned in England with the death of Edward VI. De Brès returned to the Low Countries and took up a pastorate in Lille, a city which had a Reformed contingent very early on (*Guy de Brès*, 40–41, 63). It was also a city which had offered up more than her share of martyrs (40–41, 79). De Brès' ministry here was powerful, but his influence spread far and wide through his itinerant preaching and teaching. While in Lille, he also wrote his first published work, *Le Baston de la Foy Chrestienne* (1555). This was written as a retort to an earlier popular Roman Catholic work, *La Bouclier de la Foy* (1547). As a retort, it is composed mostly of Scripture passages that contradict specific Roman Catholic teachings. The first edition was dedicated to his church in Lille, that they would “perpetually persevere in the knowledge of the gospel of the Son of God.”³⁰ De Brès' first (very popular) work thus emerges out of an environment where the Reformed faith was struggling to exist because of persecution.

Though he does not appear to have been involved with the first edition, it was during de Brès' years in Lille that the first Reformed martyrology was published. Jean Crespin published the first edition of his *Histoire des Martyrs* in Geneva in 1554. The significance of this event should not be underestimated. The rediscovered genre of martyrology contributed enormously to 16th century attitudes towards persecution and martyrdom. Music also made a significant contribution, for during the same period, Huguenot songs about persecution

25. “The Earliest Report on the Author of the Belgic Confession (1561),” N.H. Gootjes, in *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis*, 82.1 (2002) 86–94.

26. *Guy de Brès, I. Sa Vie*, E. M. Braekman (Brussels: Editions De La Librairie Des Esclaireurs Unionistes, 1960) 35.

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

28. “The Netherlands,” Alastair Duke, in *The Early Reformation in Europe*, Andrew Pettegree ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 163.

29. In his final letter to his wife, de Brès says that in the years before and after their marriage, he was a man “uncertain of life.” *Procedures Held With Regard To Those of the Religion of the Netherlands* (1568), author, translator, and publisher unknown, 136.

30. Quoted in *Guy de Brès*, 87. Translation mine.

and endurance in suffering were becoming so popular that they were printed and widely distributed.³¹

Persecution and suffering continued to impact de Brès' life. Several members of his congregation were martyred for their faith (*Guy de Brès*, 98–99). Eventually, his popularity became his undoing in Lille. After a crackdown on the Reformed believers, the authorities were soon on de Brès' trail and in 1556 he was forced to flee into exile once again, this time to Frankfurt in Germany. He was only there for a short time before moving on again, this time to Lausanne, where he studied under Pierre Viret. Lausanne was a veritable training ground for Reformation preachers. It shared this distinction, of course, with Geneva and before long, de Brès had also spent time there. Among other subjects, de Brès had given special attention to the early church fathers in his studies and his facility in this area is reflected in his recorded debates (*Procedures*, 4).

By 1559, the atmosphere was such that de Brès could return to the Lowlands. It was at about this time that he married Catherine Ramon, a native of Tournai, where de Brès was ministering at this time (*Guy de Brès*, 118). At the time of de Brès' arrival, Tournai was very sympathetic to the cause of the Reformation and a relatively safe place for a Protestant pastor to live and minister.³² While he lived and did most of his pastoral work in Tournai, he also carried out some itinerant work in other towns, particularly Lille and Valenciennes.³³

Mention was made earlier of Jean Crespin, the author

of the first Reformed martyrology. Crespin and de Brès had crossed paths during de Brès' sojourns outside the Lowlands. During de Brès' first year in Tournai, Crespin wrote to de Brès asking for information about Reformed martyrs in that area. De Brès responded and this information was incorporated into the second edition of *Histoire des Martyrs*.³⁴

After nearly two years of relative peace in Tournai, things began to deteriorate for de Brès. The public singing of psalms (*chanteries*) had been strictly prohibited, but in September of 1561 a good number of citizens ignored the prohibition. There was an ongoing debate among the Reformed believers about whether or not the authorities could be challenged in this fashion. De Brès took his stand and warned his parishioners against this practice, but to no avail. Before long, Margaret of Parma received news that the people of Tournai were openly violating the law. She sent a commission of noblemen to investigate and arrest the instigators. Consequently, the relative peace and safety of Tournai was compromised and de Brès was again forced to live on the run.³⁵

It was at about this time that De Brès penned his *Confession de Foy*, later known as the Belgic Confession.³⁶ The Confession was printed and consequently tossed over the castle wall at Tournai. The title page includes a subtitle, "Made with common agreement by the faithful living in the Lowlands who desire to live according to the purity of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."³⁷ There is a seal with an abbreviated Latin translation of Psalm 102:26a, "All grow old, however the Lord will remain."³⁸ Finally, just above the date (1561), there is a quote from 1 Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to respond to anyone who demands from you a reason for the hope which is in you." For our purposes, it is especially this last quote which calls our attention again to the theme of persecution. The context in 1 Peter 3 is clearly one of persecution and suffering. Consequently, it was not difficult for de Brès to appropriate these words for the particular situation the Reformed churches were facing in 1561 in the Lowlands.

After the title page, there is a poem (*sonnet*) most likely written by de Brès. In this little four-stanza work, the author pleads for the ruling authorities to give the Reformed believers a fair hearing. It concludes by claiming that if the rulers would only read the Confession, they would know that to condemn the Reformed believers would be a very grave injustice.³⁹ The possibility of another kind of verdict looms in the background.

Then follows the Dedicatory Epistle to Philip II. This epistle follows somewhat the pattern of Calvin's dedication of the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian*

31. *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, Brad S. Gregory (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) 170.

32. See Duke, "The Netherlands," (96–97) for some discussion on why this was so.

33. *Guy de Brès*, 133. He also sometimes ministered in his hometown of Mons and also in Douai.

34. "Contribution à l'Histoire du Livre des Martyrs," Gerard Moreau, *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français*, 103 (1957) 196–199. Cited in *Salvation at Stake*, 426.

35. Cf. *The Church's Witness to the World*, P. Y. DeJong (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1980) 24–25, and *Guy de Brès*, 151ff.

36. Nicolaas Gootjes suggests that it is quite probable that the Confession was already written at the end of May, 1561. Cf. *The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources*, Nicolaas H. Gootjes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 30.

37. "Faiçte d'un commun accord par les fideles qui conversent és pays bas, lesquels desirent vivre selon la pureté de l'Evangile de nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ." Translation mine.

38. "Omnia veterascent, Dominus autem permanebit." Translation mine.

39. "... Vous connaîtrez, lisant notre Confession, Que de nous condamner c'est trop grande injustice." *Guy de Brès*, 162, cf. *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Ton Bolland, 1976) 60 (this source gives the older, original orthography).

Religion to Francis I. The goal of both is the same: to persuade the ruling authorities that the Reformed believers pose no threat to the state and that the Reformed religion simply follows the Word of God. The theme of persecution and martyrdom permeates this epistle like no other writing of Guido de Brès.

Already in the first paragraph, we hear about the current state of affairs that the Reformed believers are facing: “But our enemies have stopped your ears with so many false accusations and reports that we are not only prevented from appearing before you, but driven from your territories, murdered and burnt wherever we may be.”⁴⁰ Further on in the epistle, de Brès makes it clear that the Reformed faithful are determined to hold to the faith they confess in this document. He writes:

The banishments, prisons, racks, exiles, tortures and countless other persecutions plainly demonstrate that our desire and conviction is not carnal, for we would lead a far easier life if we did not embrace and maintain 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 body to be burnt, for we know that he who would follow Christ must take up his cross and deny himself.

The dedicatory epistle is not often quoted, but when it is, it is usually this remarkable passage. It speaks poignantly of the determination of de Brès and his fellow Reformed. Their martyrdoms (or potential martyrdoms) and persecution were interpreted and understood in the light of what they understood Christ to be saying to them in Scripture.

The blood of the martyrs is mentioned further on in the epistle and de Brès makes amply clear that the Reformed believers are willing to seal this Confession with their blood. The dedication stands out for its boldness in the light of the contemporary circumstances. There can be little question that this early introduction to the Belgic Confession was framed under the shadow of persecution.

Finally, before the actual body of the Confession, de Brès included “Some passages of the New Testament in which the faithful are exhorted to render confession of their faith before men” (*De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, 68). The first passage mentioned is Matthew 10:32–33, “Therefore whoever confesses me before men, him I will also confess before my Father who is

in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven.” The context of Matthew 10 is that of the Lord Jesus sending out the apostles and warning them of coming persecution and even martyrdom. This reference is followed by the parallel passages of Mark 8:38 and Luke 9:26, “For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” Here too, the context is one of suffering and persecution, with both passages making reference to the taking up of one’s cross. Then follows a reference to a passage already mentioned, 1 Peter 3:15 and references to Romans 10:10 and 2 Timothy 2:12b. The last two passages excepted, the references here are almost entirely to be located contextually in persecution, suffering and martyrdom.

At this point, one finally gets to the body of the Belgic Confession. Throughout the Confession we find references to enemies, persecution, and martyrdom. In Article 12, we read about the devils and evil spirits who “lie in wait like murderers to ruin the church and all its members...”⁴¹ They wait “to destroy everything by their wicked devices.” In Article 13, concerning the providence of God, de Brès writes about the consolation this doctrine provides: “In this we trust, because we know that He holds in check the devil and all our enemies so that they cannot hurt us without his permission and will.” Article 27 is perhaps the most pointed in this regard. De Brès writes about how God preserves the church “against the fury of the whole world.” He makes a reference to the reign of Ahab during which “the Lord kept for himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal.” Article 28 continues the theme when it speaks of believers joining the assembly of the church “wherever God has established it. They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow.” In Article 29, de Brès mentions the characteristics of the false church. Among these is the fact that “It persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God.” Finally, in the last article of his confession, de Brès writes about the last judgment. He says that the righteous will be vindicated:

40. This quote and all those that follow from the epistle are from the English translation found on the Internet at this site: <http://dutchrevolt.leidenuniv.nl/English/Sources%20English/1561.htm> (accessed February 13, 2008). The French original can be found in *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, 62–68.

41. The translation of the Belgic Confession from the *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1998) is used here.

“Their innocence will be known to all and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring upon the wicked who persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.”

The booklet containing the Confession was concluded with a remonstrance addressed to the magistrates of the Low Countries. In this remonstrance, de Brès called for them to carry out their God-given task of delivering justice. Not unexpectedly, this document also contains the themes of persecution and martyrdom.⁴²

Moreover, although this falls outside the thesis of this paper, we can also note that the entire package (including the Confession) was also an attempt by de Brès to reach the authorities with the true gospel—and then not only the authorities, but also the people under their rule. It was not merely an effort to allow for religious toleration; there was also a kerygmatic character to the package. In this way as well, the Confession and its accompanying documents held missionary significance.

The metanarrative of persecution and martyrdom continued as de Brès fled Tournai. Shortly after the confession was delivered, somebody gave the authorities a description of de Brès, who by this time had changed his appearance and was going by the name of Jerome. An order went out from Tournai that de Brès, should he be found, must be arrested. De Brès had fled, but the congregation he left behind was ravaged by persecution and martyrdom. De Brès himself was burned in effigy (*Guy de Brès*, 179–180).

This time de Brès fled south to France and he served the Reformed churches there. From December 1561 to July 1566, de Brès served the churches in Dieppe, Amiens, Montdidier, Sedan and Metz (*Guy de Brès*, 212–213). This was again a time of relative peace for de Brès personally since each of these cities was populated by large contingents of Reformed believers. However, it

does appear that, from time to time, de Brès returned to Tournai. In fact, Braekman argues that de Brès again served as an informant for Crespin during this time, informing him of the events surrounding the martyrdom of Michel l’Aveugle (*Guy de Brès*, 185–189). It would appear that martyrdom and suffering continued to be on his mind and in his heart.

During his years in France, de Brès was responsible for the publication of three more works. *Oraison au Seigneur* was a small 24 page booklet containing a prayer for Reformed believers living in the midst of persecution. Next, in 1565 de Brès translated a 255 page Dutch book regarding the imprisonment and martyrdom of Christopher Fabri.⁴³ Finally, in 1565, de Brès wrote and published his book dealing with Anabaptist teachings, *La Racine, Source et Fondement des Anabaptistes*.

De Brès returned to the Lowlands in July of 1566 after being pressured by the pastor of the Reformed Church at Valenciennes, “The Geneva of Flanders.” De Brès joined Pérégrin de la Grange in pastoring not only this large church, but also the surrounding congregations in Lille and Tournai (*Guy de Brès*, 223–224). However, on August 24, 1566, iconoclastic fervour gripped Valenciennes with devastating consequences. The ruling authorities, being Roman Catholic, were outraged. The city was declared guilty of rebellion and was eventually besieged for three months. After the capitulation of the city on March 23, 1567, de Brès and de la Grange managed to escape but not for very long. On March 28 they were captured and imprisoned initially at Tournai (March 31 to April 11).⁴⁴ During this time, various visitors came to see de Brès and attempted to debate with him. Records of many of these debates are found in *Procedures*. On April 11, the prisoners were transferred to Valenciennes, to an obscure prison named Brunain. De Brès was held in the lowest place of the building where the sewage and filth ended up.⁴⁵ Despite the ugliness of these living conditions, de Brès continued to write letters of encouragement to his congregation and others (including his wife and mother). Finally, on May 30, 1567, de Brès was martyred for his faith. He was hung for celebrating the Lord’s Supper contrary to the commandment of the magistrates. Afterwards, his body was placed in a shallow grave and shortly thereafter desecrated by wild animals (*Procedures*, 150–152, 154).

De Brès died a martyr, but his *Confession de Foy* lived on. By the time of his death, it had been widely accepted throughout the Lowlands. It went through numerous printings and was translated into Dutch already in 1562. Within a century, it had been translated into German, Latin, Greek, English and Spanish (*Guy de Brès*, 176).

42. *Guy de Brès*, 171–174. Braekman quotes the remonstrance: “Si au milieu de la flamme en angoisses de la mort, tu ne peux arracher au fidèle martyr, la confiance qu’il a mise en Jésus Christ, ne confesseras-tu point que tu persécutes et crucifies derechef Jésus-Christ en ses mem-Brès, quand tu baignes et ton coeur et tes mains au sang de celui qui par foi vive tâche de se transformer en son image, et le vêtir par l’esprit de régénération?” (172)

43. *Histoire notable de la trahison et emprisonnement de deux bons et fidèles personnages en la ville d’Annuers: c’est assavoir, de Christophe Fabri, Ministre de la parole de Dieu en la dite ville, et d’Oliuier Bouck, Professeur...*, cf. *Salvation at Stake*, endnote 183 (427) and *Guy de Brès*, 207–208.

44. *Guy de Brès*, 257.

45. *Guy de Brès*, 260. Braekman quotes extensively from a letter written by de Brès to Pasquier de la Barre and Nicolas Soldoyer.

It quickly became one of the most widely accepted Reformation confessions.

Finally, it should be noted that the 1570 edition of Crespin's *Book of Martyrs* included an abbreviated version of the Belgic Confession. Beginning in 1582, the *Book of Martyrs* included the entire first edition of the Confession (Gootjes, *the Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources*, 33). This tells us that from a very early date, the Belgic Confession was regarded as a document stained with the blood of martyrs. Therefore, it is entirely at home with the metanarrative of martyrdom and suffering in the Christian church.

THE BELGIC CONFESSION AND MISSION

We have now come full circle and can reconsider the missiological significance of the Belgic Confession. Does this document really portray a church dialoguing with itself? If we consider the metanarrative of martyrdom and persecution that surrounds this confession one could hardly reach that conclusion. After all, the phenomenon of martyrdom is an act of witness. Furthermore, from the perspective of those giving the witness, this was not a witness to the Church, but to the world.

The Belgic Confession was formulated on the foundation of martyrdom and suffering, a theology of the cross. Those involved with its production, particularly Guido de Brès, lived in union with Jesus Christ and thus shared in his sufferings. The same can be said for those churches that first adopted this confession. They knew that being sent out with the gospel of Jesus Christ would result in suffering and possibly even death.

The Belgic Confession communicates the missiological message of martyrdom and suffering. The one who wrote it and those whose faith it expressed communicated very clearly through it that apostasy was not an option, at least in principle, if not always in practice. They were committed to the absolute and objective nature of the truth expressed in this confession. The Belgic Confession also communicates a witness about the desperation of the unbelieving world and those who claim to be Christians but whose lives do not conform to that claim. The Reformation was a missionary movement and its strength caused grave concern to those in authority (*Recultivating the Vineyard*, 70–71). Finally, the Belgic Confession communicates to the world a powerful message about the cross. In fact, the churches which first adopted this confession often called themselves “Churches Under the Cross.” They shared in the sufferings of Jesus Christ and this is plain not only in

the text of the Belgic Confession, but also in its literary and historical context.

The Belgic Confession and its rapid adoption throughout Western Europe had an enormous impact on the spread of the Reformation. The result of all the suffering and martyrdom was a rich harvest, not only in terms of growth in numbers, but also in quality. At last, the Reformed churches of the Lowlands could rally around a confession they could call their own—a confession which not only reflected what they believed the Bible to be saying, but also a confession which grew out of their experiences.

So we can say that, speaking historically, the Belgic Confession did have missiological relevance. But what about for today? The Belgic Confession speaks in Article 27 about “The Catholic Christian Church.” The Church’s catholicity is both temporal and geographic. The Belgic Confession reminds believers of the sufferings of the Church both in ages past and today. Even if believers in a given locale do not suffer for their faith, the Belgic Confession reminds them that there are multitudes of believers elsewhere who are giving or who are prepared to give the ultimate witness to and for Jesus Christ. The contemporary missiological significance of the Belgic Confession still rests in its unique witness to the sufferings of the Church in the past, present and future. The church which gives up this Confession for one emerging from a more comfortable milieu is surely impoverishing itself and its witness to the world. ■