

A Heart Aflame with Zeal (Part 1 of 2)

By W.L. Bredenhof

As we again celebrate God's wonderful work in the Protestant Reformation, it's good for us to remember the contribution of the many believers who gave up their lives for the faith. This was especially the case in the Low Countries, from which so many of us find our roots. In these regions, the words of Tertullian were often repeated among Reformed believers: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Through persecution and martyrdom, the true gospel of Christ was effectively proclaimed and the Reformation went from strength to strength.

Among the martyrs was the author of our Belgic Confession, Guido de Brès. He served as a pastor in present-day Belgium during the Spanish Inquisition. Eventually he was captured by the authorities and spent a long time languishing in a dirty, sewage-filled dungeon in Valenciennes. Nevertheless, as he lived out his last days somehow he was able to find the strength and resources to write several letters. One of them was a letter to his mother. I am pleased to be able to share this letter with you, as it gives a personal glimpse of this brother and father in the faith.

Letter from Guido de Brès to his mother

The grace and mercy of God the Father, and the love of his Son our Lord Jesus Christ, be for your eternal salvation.

My dear and beloved mother, when I consider what a sorrow my imprisonment is to you, and how hard to bear because of the enormous maternal love you have always had for me, I cannot keep my heart from becoming sad nor from greatly trembling within me. And certainly I can say from experience that it is a hard parting that takes place between a mother and her child. But the parting would be much harder if a man would leave his God and give up eternal life. I am somewhat relieved of my sadness when I think of my calling and the cause of the Son of God which I have upheld before men.

It seems to me that I hear Jesus Christ, my Master, speaking with a loud voice and saying to me, "Whoever shall love his father and his mother more than me, he is not worthy to be one of mine" (Matthew 10). Then he says to me, "Truly I say to you that every one who has given up home, or parents, or brothers or children for the kingdom of God shall receive much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life" (Matthew 19). Such words cause me to put all other things aside, and my heart leaps for joy. When I think of the certainty and truth of the one who has spoken thus, I can say with St. Paul, "I esteem all things as dung and consider them for loss, for the excellence of the knowledge of my Lord Jesus Christ."

You too, my beloved, must rise above your sorrows with the consideration of the good will of God, who wants to bring glory to himself through this poor, fragile body. Restrain your grief remembering how it has pleased God to call me to his service against all human expectation.

Recall how, before I was born, you were going through Mons to hear a certain Italian Jesuit, who was preaching in the streets. You said then, praying to God, "My God, if it could be that you could give me such a child, even maybe the child that I am carrying, to preach your Word." You said it and God heard your prayer. Because he is rich and merciful, and because he can do all things more abundantly than we dare to ask, he gave you more than you asked for. You asked that the child you were carrying could be like that Jesuit. He became a Jesuit alright – but not of the new sect that people call "Jesuit." In order to make me a true imitator of Jesus, the Son of God, I was called to the holy ministry, not to preach the doctrines of men, but the pure and simple Word of Jesus and his Apostles. This I have done up to the present with a good and pure conscience, seeking nothing else than the salvation of men, not my own glory nor my own profit.

Witness the zeal of God which has been in me, accompanied by many crosses, afflictions and sufferings, and not for a small number of days, but for many years. To all these things you ought to return for your comfort, and you should consider yourself fortunate that God has given you the honour to have carried, nurtured, and reared one of his servants – who will receive the crown and glory of martyrdom. Then it is not for you to object, if my God wants to now receive me as a pleasant-smelling sacrifice and strengthen the elect by my death.

I myself am joyful and I pray that you will join with me, knowing that all will be for my great good and salvation. I submit myself to what it pleases him to do to me, knowing that he will not do anything that is not just and fair. He is my God and Father, having only good will toward me and the power to deliver me, if he finds it good to do so. Therefore, I rest in that knowledge. If he has found it pleasing to take me from this poor life now, I shall be taken in the prime of life, having laboured diligently and sowed in the Church of his Son. He has already allowed me to see the fruit of my labours and trials, having blessed and made my ministry so fruitful that the Church will feel the effects for many years after my death. I am happy to see that which my God has permitted me to see. There is yet much good seed that I sowed, which is still in the ground, but after being watered with my blood, it will grow and manifest itself amazingly. What more then should I now desire, since the will of my God has been done, and I am ready to reap in heaven in glory and incorruption the fruit of that which I have sowed on earth with tears in my eyes? And I hope that the many people which I have won to my Lord Jesus through the Gospel will be my glory and my crown in the last day.

I am going along the way where all the prophets passed, and the Apostles, even the only Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, and thousands of martyrs who shed their blood for the witness of the Gospel. It is the voice of Christ who says, "Enter by the narrow way, for I say unto you that many will try to enter and will not be able." It is the narrow way of which Ezra speaks, which is not wide, and under which is a great river and a fire which devours those who stumble and fall. This road leads to a city filled with blessings, where the children of God have want of nothing. What should it profit me if I should travel with the world along the broad and spacious way, only to fall at the end into ruin and eternal perdition. I know well that if I should renounce my good Lord Jesus and return in my impurity and pollution to this life, the world would embrace

me and respect my person. But it would not be pleasing to God to renounce my Saviour, to put idols in his place, and put profane things in the place of his precious blood. I have served him for more than twenty years, and never has he failed me in anything, showing to me always a love which surpasses the understanding of men. Beyond this great benefit, he gave himself to the inglorious death on the cross in order to give me eternal life. What then? Should I leave the living to find refuge among the dead? Should I give up heaven for the earth? Eternal things for temporal? Abandon the true life for bodily death?

He who alone is my strength and my rock will keep me from it, and himself will be my shield and defense and the strength of my life in my weakness and infirmity. I can say with St. Peter, when Christ asked him after many of his disciples had abandoned him, "And you," he said, "do you not also wish to go as the others?" Peter replied, "Lord, to whom should we go? For with you are the words of eternal life." The Lord my God will not permit me to leave with the world the fountains of living water, in order to dig cisterns which do not hold any water, as God so rightly said by his prophet Jeremiah of his people Israel. I believe with conviction that I am not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. I can say with Moses that I would rather be afflicted with the people of God, than to enjoy for a time the pleasures of sin. I would rather esteem the favour of Christ as greater riches than all the treasures of the world, for I look to the reward, and trust that the power of faith will not fail me in my need. For by it I have already overcome the world and all my adversaries. The Apostle has showed me how the faithful ones of the Old Testament, having the same faith, surmounted their afflictions. He speaks of some as being regarded as drums to be beaten, who refused to be delivered, hoping for a better resurrection, and of others who were mocked and battered. They were arrested and put in prison. They were stoned. They were sawn in two. They were tempted. They were put to death with the sword. They wandered about dressed in the skins of sheep and goats. They were destitute, afflicted, and tormented, of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered about in the deserts, in mountains, and dens and caverns of the earth. All these holy people have overcome the world through their faith at death, and stand as victors though people killed them.

What can I say then when God places before my eyes such a multitude of witnesses and valiant champions? I put as far from me as I can the burden of sin which encompasses me. I endeavour to be more cheerful and to undergo with patience that combat which is set before me. All the while, I endeavour to look to Jesus the author and perfecter of faith. When he could choose between glory and the cross, he chose the cross, scorning its shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Think and rethink of him who suffered such opposition from sinners, so that I will not become weary and fail in my courage. I consider that I have not yet resisted against sin to the shedding of blood. It is enough (says Jesus Christ) that the servant is not greater than his lord. I have been richly blessed with great rejoicing when I see that my Master Jesus Christ has honoured me in allowing me to sit with him at his table, letting me eat of his bread, and drink of his own cup and his pitcher. Is it a small thing to follow such a Lord? It is he who made the heavens and the earth from nothing by his mighty word. It is he before whom the angels and archangels cover their faces and tremble. And here I am, a

poor clay jar full of weakness, and it pleases him to call me his friend and not his servant. O what an honour! He has not given the angels the honour of suffering for his name. And who am I to receive such an honour from my God? Seriously, I am enraptured when I consider these things. (*To be continued*)

Some Thoughts

What an incredible letter! There are several striking features. One is the way in which de Brès constantly works with the Word of God to encourage his mother. Scriptural quotes and allusions are found throughout and in the concluding instalment this will again be evident. Another striking feature is the fact that de Brès writes to his mother and from this it's clear that not only he, but also she used to be a Roman Catholic but was converted to the true Christian faith. He comforts her with the true gospel. Who was converted first? We do not know. The details of how de Brès became a Christian are not available to us – the only thing we know is that it happened in his twenties.

Finally, we also see something of the wit of de Brès. He mentions his mother hearing a Jesuit preacher. At first glance, there appears to be a problem here for De Brès was born in 1522, whereas the Jesuit order was not founded until 1540. How could de Brès' mother hear an Italian Jesuit in 1522 when there were no Jesuits yet? One of his biographers (E.M. Braekman) thought that de Brès was just playing with words, using a rhetorical device. De Brès knew full well that the Jesuits began in 1540, but he wanted to liven up his writing and so described the Italian priest in 1522 as being a Jesuit. This fits well with what we know about de Brès' writing style. He could be incisive at times, witty at others. For instance, in Article 34 of the Belgic Confession, de Brès speaks of how baptism "benefits us not only when the water is on us and when we receive it, but throughout our whole life." In the first 1561 edition, de Brès added a witty line, "otherwise we would always have to have our head in the water." The reference to the Italian Jesuit is just further evidence of the rhetorical wit of de Brès. Even as the raw sewage filled his prison cell, this Reformed martyr kept his sense of humour.

The text of the letter is found in *Procedures tenues a l'endroit de ceux la religion du pais bas* (Geneva: Jean Crespin, 1568), 367-388. There is an English translation available (*Procedures Held With Regard To Those of the Religion of the Netherlands*), but it is of poor quality. I have worked with that translation, correcting and improving from the original where necessary.

A Heart Aflame with Zeal (Part 2 of 2)

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In May of 1567, two Reformed pastors languished in a prison cell in Valenciennes (in present-day Belgium). One was Pérégrin de la Grange, the other Guido de Brès, the author of our Belgic Confession. Despite the awful conditions, de Brès was able to write a number of letters. Last time, I began sharing the letter to his mother. It continues:

Letter of Guido de Bres to his mother (continued)

Besides, he comforts me without ceasing in my struggles; he is a prisoner here with me. I recognize Jesus Christ my master. I see him, as it were, enshackled in my irons and chains. With the eyes of my spirit I see him locked up in my dark and gloomy prison. He promised me in his trustworthy word to be with me to the end of my life. He says that when the least of his disciples is taken prisoner that that is he, himself, saying "I was a prisoner and you visited me." He says to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" when Saul was persecuting the poor believers. But Christ says that it is he that is attacked. He said through his prophet Zechariah, "Whoever harms you harms the apple of my eye." What is more precious and more carefully guarded than the eye? And behold my Lord who says that the trials and afflictions which happen to me are done to the apple of his eye. O what a Master, what a Saviour my God has allowed me to find! Do you find many masters who speak thus of their servants? I don't believe so.

He is here with me with a multitude of angels, comforting and strengthening me and causing the words of his mouth to fall as a sweet melody upon my ears. He is saying to me, "I will give to those who overcome to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of my God. I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich. You are blaspheming, you who claim to be Jews and are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan. Do not fear the things which you have to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison." Then he says to me, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." O what comfort! My heart leaps within me when these words sound in my ears. It is not a liar or a deceiver who speaks thus, but it is the Son of God, the mouth without deceit, the infallible truth.

Being thus comforted, strengthened and prepared by the divine consolation, I struggle in my chains, believing myself to be a thousand times happier to have a part and communion in the sufferings and afflictions of Christ, knowing that I am not suffering for having done wrong or having extorted anyone. I have procured the salvation of all men; as much as it was in me, I have announced peace to everyone. And I do not suffer for anything else except for having preached Jesus Christ crucified for the salvation of men. And as witness to that, I call on the consciences of those who hold me shackled here as a criminal. I resolve to suffer for Christ, for the truth, for justice. I do so in the light of what St. Peter says about how the Spirit of the glory of Christ rests on me. I am contented. I am filled up with blessings. I am in need of nothing, since the Lord has filled me with blessing.

What shall I say then? God has allowed me to see the kingdom of his Son flourish in the land of my birth. Now that he calls me to rest, I can indeed heartily say with the old man Simeon, holding Christ as a newborn in my arms, "Now, Creator, let your servant depart, according to your promise." I am content to leave this mortal life to enter the rest of my God.

Well then, my dear mother, when you see me thus well prepared and cheerful, be content, and rejoice with me at the honour which God gives you. God gave you a son who preached his word, although you intended to ask for one who would preach human doctrines. And as the crosses and persecutions easily accompany the word of God, I am sharing in them. Do not find this strange, for whoever wishes to live faithfully in Jesus Christ will suffer persecution, just as St. Paul witnesses to everyone in 1 Timothy 3. Then be content.

God has allowed you to see all of your children married and you have seen their offspring. You have lived to a good age, and according to the course of nature, you will not have long to live after me. I am going on before and you will follow after me after you have lived out your days. One should not dwell on the sufferings of this present life or spend too much time contemplating them. All that only brings tears to the eyes and shakes up people. But it should be remembered that all of this passes quickly, and the joy which follows afterwards will be eternal and permanent. And the persecutors are only heaping up for themselves the wrath of God which shall ruin and overcome them at the end. Don't you see that one generation passes and another comes? Thus everything passes lightly as the wind and the smoke; it is nothing that has any durability. The one dies today and the other tomorrow. The one dies one way, and the other another. There is no happiness in this unstable and fickle age, except for those who build on the firm foundation which is Jesus Christ.

Put before your eyes the example of that virtuous mother mentioned in chapter 7 of the second book of Maccabees. She saw seven of her sons martyred in one day. She saw them die a very cruel death, the tongue cut out, the arms and legs cut off, then being roasted in a kettle over the fire. She saw the pitiful sight before her eyes and she showed a truly courageous heart, comforting and strengthening her children so that they could endure death for the Law of God. And when the youngest showed signs of being stirred by the promises of the tyrant, she again encouraged him to suffer and to go the way of his brothers, telling him that he was giving his life and his body for the Law of God, and that he would be raised up in the resurrection.

That reminds me of reading in church history about the great persecutions. There was this time when the poor Christians were gathered outside of some city to hear the word of God. There was a certain governor who had been sent to put to death these poor faithful ones. Now as this governor was on his way to execute his wicked commission, word came to the ears of a faithful and true Christian woman. She ran quickly with her baby in her arms to join the gathering. Now as she came to the soldiers of the tyrants, she pushed her way through. The governor saw her hurrying and asked her where she was going in such haste. She promptly

responded that she was going to join the gathering of Christians. He said to her, "Haven't you understood the charge and the commission which was given to me to put all these people to death?" She responded, "Yes, I have and that is why I am hurrying, so that I may be so fortunate as to suffer with the others." Then he asked her, "And what will you do with this little child?" "I am taking him with me," she said, "that he may also share in the crown of martyrs with the others." The tyrant was broken-hearted at the words of this woman and returned to his master without executing his task. Behold, that was definitely a heart marvellously aflame with zeal for the love of God – it was a heart worthy to be held up as an example for all women.

It reminds me again of another mother and her son at the time when Romain was martyred. When he was asked to adore some images, he said loudly and clearly in a public place that he adored only one God through Jesus Christ his Son and that this doctrine was so certain and true, that if they would ask a young child of seven years who was not preoccupied with any particular affection, he would say this same thing. So they took a small child of about seven years age and Romain asked him saying, "Come here, my son. Should we worship many gods, or should we worship God through Jesus Christ?" The child answered him, "Among us small children, we know that there is only one God." Then the tyrant sent for the mother, and whipped the little child in the presence of his mother. The child asked for a drink from his mother. She responded to him, "Alas, my child, I have nothing from which to give you a drink. But go my son, drink from the cup of martyrs with the little children which Herod put to death." Then the child was beheaded.

Such examples are worthy to be held before your eyes and all faithful mothers so that they will not resemble the mother of the sons of Zebedee. She presented her two sons to Christ, but it was so that they might be great before the world. "I would, Lord," she said, "that my two sons should be seated, the one at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." Now she meant an earthly kingdom. But Jesus Christ said, referring to the cross, "Can you drink of the cup which I must drink?" In so saying, he was showing that to enter into his kingdom, the cross and sufferings serve as steps, just as Christ suffered and then entered into glory. Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of heaven.

And now, my good mother, I beg you to show yourself as a virtuous woman in your afflictions, and bear patiently and joyfully this trial that God has sent you, knowing that it is the good will of God against which no one can resist, even if he would. Live the rest of your days in the fear of God, remembering me, and how I served my God till death.

I commend to you always my poor wife and my little children so long as you live in this world. They are losing their father in their tender youth. I pray the Lord my God with all my heart that he will be their compassionate and merciful father, and that he will give them his Holy Spirit in their childhood, and cause them to walk in his fear all the days of their life. I ask him without ceasing to give me this blessing, and that he would also bless my poor widow and show his favour to her always. I am glad that she has gone with the children to Sedan – this is to me a

little solace and peace of mind. And when she is far away from you and my brothers, I beg you all not to forget her, but take care of her along with the little ones.

I pray the Lord my God that he will fill you with all his graces and heavenly blessings, confirm you in all good things, until he receives you in his blessed kingdom with all his true children. I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is powerful to strengthen you and gives an inheritance among all the saints. Farewell, my mother, farewell, my good mother. May the Lord comfort you in your tribulation.

May 19, 1567. By your son, who loves you dearly, Guy de Brès, prisoner and ensnaked for Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Concluding Thoughts

A lot could be said about what de Brès writes in this last part of the letter. Let me just mention a couple of points. In article 6 of the Belgic Confession, de Brès affirmed that the “church may read and take instruction from” the apocryphal books. In this letter he mentions what may be learned from 2 Maccabees 7. Interestingly, de Brès mentions the apocryphal books quite a number of times in his other writings.

His use of 2 Maccabees is historical and that ties into the second point which is his deep awareness of church history. To comfort his mother, he was able to appeal not only to the Scriptures, but also to what God had done in times past with other martyrs. The events that he mentions seem to be rather obscure – at least, I have not been able to track them down. But that probably says more about our impoverishment when it comes to church history than it does about de Brès. He knew the church fathers and the early history of the church in a way that puts many twenty-first century pastors to shame.

Some day we will have an opportunity to meet de Brès in person. I for one am looking forward to it. Here was a man who grew up Roman Catholic but eventually was gripped by God and his grace in Jesus Christ. He was so gripped that he was willing and able to give up his life on a scaffold on May 31, 1567. What a testimony to God’s mercy and power! No praise for man here, only for God. That’s who de Brès would want us to glorify.

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