

The Martyrdom of Guido de Bres

By W.L. Bredenhof

Most of us should be familiar with the name of the author of the Belgic Confession, Guido (or Guy) de Bres. We probably remember from church history or catechism classes that de Bres was martyred for his faith. Recently, I came across an eyewitness account of that martyrdom which took place on May 31, 1567. De Bres was hung for his faith after spending several weeks in the lowest part of a prison called Brunain in Valenciennes, which today is part of France. De Bres' cell was the place where the prison sewage ended up. Keeping that in mind, this letter speaks powerfully of the grace of God in the life of this saint and, for that reason, it's worth sharing with you. Here's how it goes:¹

“The death of these two servants of God, ministers of the Reformed church of Valenciennes, namely M. Guy, and M. De la Grange, and other prisoners executed on the same day for the same cause, has all been faithfully recorded in the letter which follows:

Dear brothers,

We wish to inform you of the happy end of our two brothers and ministers, namely, Guy de Bres, and Peregrin De la Grange, who after having been held prisoners since the eleventh of April, 1567, until the last of May of the same year, were finally condemned to death, to be hung in the market place in front of the city hall.

During the time of their imprisonment they were happy in their bonds, not changing even at the end. For, when on the last Saturday of May, the provost came to tell them that at about three o'clock, so that they might prepare themselves for death at about six o'clock or there about, these servants of the Gospel began to praise God. They thanked the provost for the good news which he had brought to them.

Soon after this, they rose, and M. Guy went into the front court to say good day to the other prisoners. He testified to them of his joy when he spoke to them in this way: “My brothers, I am condemned to death today for the doctrine of the Son of God, praise be to Him. I would never have thought that God would have given me such an honour. I feel the grace of God flowing in me more and more. It strengthens me from moment to moment, and my heart leaps within me for joy.” Then exhorting the prisoners to be of good courage, he declared that death was nothing. He quoted a passage of Revelation, the exclamation, “Oh, happy are the dead who die in the Lord! They now rest from their labours.” He prayed the prisoners to remain firm and constant in the doctrine of the Son of God which he had preached to them, saying that it was the pure truth of God. “As also,” he said, “I have maintained before the bishop of Arras, and many others. I shall answer for it before the face of my God. Take care that you do nothing against what your conscience dictates, for the enemies of the Gospel will try to make you go against your conscience. Watch out for this, for you will then have a tormentor who will feed on your consciences, which will be a continual hell. Oh, my brothers, how good it is to keep a good conscience.”

Then the prisoners asked him if he had finished a certain writing that he had begun. He said that he had not, and that he was not going to work any more, because he was soon to be at rest in heaven. He said, "The time of my departure has come. I am going to reap in heaven that which I have sown on earth. I have fought a good fight. I have run my course, keeping the faith of my captain. The crown of glory, which the Lord and Just Judge will give me, is waiting for me. It seems [this he said with a joyous and smiling face] that my soul will have wings to soar to heaven where it is going today to the marriage feast of my Lord, the Son of my God."

And as he spoke, the provost came into the court. And putting his hand to his cap, he saluted him. And again, Guy thanked him for the good news which he brought. The provost answered, "It grieves me that such a thing is to happen." At which Guy joyously said to him, "You are my friend, I love you with all my heart." Then taking leave of the prisoners, he was brought back to the cell...

...Shortly afterward, these two servants of God were led to the city hall, to receive the sentence of death, namely, to be hung and strangled for having acted contrary to the command of the Regent. They did so in having celebrated the Lord's Supper against his order, not mentioning the doctrine which they preached. For not having upheld this doctrine were they condemned. Both were victorious over their enemies even unto death. As M. De la Grange was led to the execution, he announced in a loud voice from the step that he was dying for no other cause than for having upheld the truth of God before the people. Thus passed this faithful servant from this life to eternal life.

A little while later they led M. Guy, who prostrated himself, wishing to pray at the bottom of the step. This they would not allow him to do, and lifting him up, they made him mount the steps quickly. Reaching the top, he exhorted them to have respect for the magistrate, who was doing that which was required of him. He begged of them to persevere in the doctrine which he had proclaimed to them, protesting that he had never preached anything but the truth of God. He had not finished his words when the commissioner made a sign to the officer to hurry. This he did. But as soon as the ladder was taken away, there began such a disturbance among the armed soldiers that they began to run about, discharging their guns at those whom they encountered, Papists as well as others, even killing those of their own number.

All this happened without any apparent reason. The Captains could not recall their own men, so that they had difficulty in preventing those who started to pillage the shops. We can think only that God had sent this terror as a sign of His just judgment. The men were so seized with fright that they were overwhelmed."

The letter goes on to relate that the bodies were left hanging on the gallows for some time, but were later taken down and placed in shallow graves. However, "the beasts of the field" managed to mutilate them – not a new thing, says the author of the letter, if we pay attention to Psalm 74.

Some Thoughts on the Letter

Such was the end of a remarkable figure in the history of the Reformed churches. Let's take a brief look at some elements of the account. First, notice the great joy that filled de Bres as he faced death for his faith. De Bres and De la Grange were consumed with the vision of what waited them. A part of the letter that I didn't quote mentioned that De la Grange even polished his shoes, "giving as his reason that he was going to the marriage feast, and to the eternal feast of the Lamb." These men were totally assured of their vindication in glory. As Christians living in a time of relative freedom, we may sometimes be missing something of their passionate conviction.

Second, notice that de Bres, even in the hours before his death, cared deeply about others. He cared for his fellow prisoners. This letter and others make clear that de Bres spent many of his hours in prison witnessing to his neighbours. While in prison, he had preached to them "the doctrine of the Son of God." Further, notice Guy's love and compassion for the provost or prison warden when he says, "You are my friend, I love you with all my heart." What a powerful testimony of the grace of God in the life of this man! Could we do the same if we were faced with jail and execution for our faith?

The final thing that is striking is the manner in which de Bres goes to the scaffold. In particular, notice the way that he exhorts the people to respect the government. Despite the persecution he endured, the author of Belgic Confession Article 36 maintained his principles: "Moreover, everyone – no matter of what quality, condition, or rank – ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God." I mentioned that we live in a time of relative freedom. However, this could very well change and it seems to be changing before our eyes. Nevertheless, our principles are based on Scripture and must never be compromised. Should it happen, and may God prevent it, that we are hunted down for our faith, we must continue to respect those over us. In this, de Bres gives us a powerful example to follow.

Today, martyrdom and persecution continue to be unpleasant facts for many believers around the world. Despite the great evil perpetrated, God still turns these terrible things for the good of his people. We can read and hear about contemporary accounts of martyrs and be greatly encouraged in our walk with God. But we can still look back to the 1560s, a terrible time of bloodshed, and be equally encouraged by the testimony of our fathers. Indeed, praise God for his faithful servant Guido de Bres and countless others like him!

¹ This letter is found in *Procedures Held With Regard to Those of the Religion of the Netherlands: In which is fully related how Guy de Bres and Peregrin De la Grange, faithful ministers at Valenciennes, signed with their blood the doctrine of the Gospel which they proclaimed truly: also the last attacks and disputes held against certain apostates and enemies of the cross and of the truth of the Son of God WITH the happy end of other notable personages who for the same true faith suffered death, 1568.* (Translation of a reprint contained in *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, Volume 8, pp.491-643), pp.148-152.