



Tracing Guido de Bres in Doornik

Most Reformed people know the remarkable story of the Belgic Confession: How it was written by Guido de Bres and how on the night of November 1, 1561, a copy of the confession was thrown over the wall of the castle in Doornik (French: Tournai).

This year we celebrate the 450th anniversary of the Belgic Confession. It is about time, I thought, to find out whether the castle wall is still there in Doornik and whether there might be any traces of Guido de Bits in this town in southern Belgium. In June this year I had an opportunity to visit Doornik together with my dad and my uncle, Frans Hamelink. The distance between Zaamslag, where my parents live, and Doornik is only 120 kilometres. Thus, less than two hours after leaving home we found ourselves enjoying a cappuccino at Café Le Central on the main square of Doornik.

We had chosen Café Le Central for a reason: Apparently it was from a balcony of this building that announcements were made about executions of Protestants in the sixteenth century. During those years the scaffold had a permanent place on the main square. When Guido de Bits came to Doornik in the late 1560s, many Reformed believers had already been executed at this place. One of the first martyrs was the well-known minister Pierre Brully. He was burned at the stake in February 1545. Others were hanged or beheaded.

It is a beautiful summer morning in early June. As we watch, waiters putting out tables and chairs in the main square, it is hard to imagine that once upon a time people were executed at this place for no other reason than that they professed Reformed beliefs.

Yet, some of the buildings have a story to tell. The Belfry, for example. This bell-tower catches the eye with its architectural beauty. Dating back to the twelfth century, the tower is registered on the UNESCO World Heritage List. But there is a dark side to this building as well: During the sixteenth century it served as a prison for Calvinist believers. As you walk around the Belfry it is quite something to imagine that once upon a time fellow believers used to be imprisoned here.

Christine de Lalaing

While many historical buildings in Doornik trumpet the victory of Roman Catholicism, there is one remarkable exception: the statue of Christine de Lalaing in the main square. She was the wife of the governor who ruled Doornik during the few years the city was actually under Protestant rule. It is a history that is largely forgotten, but during the 1570s many cities in the southern Netherlands joined the revolt led by William of Orange. Important cities like Doornik, Ghent, and Antwerp revolted against the Spanish and accepted the Protestant faith. In fact, during those years the Reformation was stronger in the southern Netherlands (present-day Belgium) than in the northern provinces.

In order to stamp out the rebellion King Philip II of Spain sent a strong army to the southern Netherlands, led by the Alexander Farnese, the Duke of Parma. Under Parma's capable leadership the cities that had turned Protestant were besieged and taken back one after the other. Doornik was one of the first cities on Parma's list. He besieged the city in 1581. Christine de Lalaing played an important role in organizing the city's defenses and inspiring the defenders to persevere. In the end, however, the attackers were too strong and the city fell into the hands of the Spanish. The Calvinist believers left and Doornik has been predominantly Roman Catholic ever since.

In an ironic twist of history Christine de Lalaing still got the upper hand many years later. In 1863 the city council of Doornik decided to place a statue of the brave woman in the main square of the city. It was felt that she exemplified the courageous spirit of the people of Doornik. This decision did not sit well with the local Roman Catholic clergy. They hated the statue of the female Protestant warrior and for many years the priests decreed that the annual Grande Procession through the city should not pass through the main square. It is only since the last decade or so that the procession passes through the main square again!

Rue de Marvis

Although the main square of Doornik has many connections to the history of the Reformation, there is nothing here that reminds the visitor of Guido de Bres. In order to find traces of him we need to leave the center of the town and move to the east side of the river that flows through the city. During the sixteenth century this area constituted the St. Brixie parish. It was a clever decision by Guido de Bres to settle down in St. Brixie because this parish was part of the diocese of Kamerijk (Cambrai). The bishop of Doornik had no direct authority here and living in St. Brixie might be just a little bit safer for a Reformed minister.

As far as we know, Guido de Bres lived in a house on Rue de Marvis. This street is still there today and it still speaks to the observant visitor. Especially when exploring the side alleys with their small and sometimes dilapidated houses, you get a feel for the historical situation. It is not difficult to imagine Guido de Bres walking through these alleys, carrying a Bible and a few copies of the Belgic Confession under his cloak, on his way to a meeting of Calvinist believers somewhere in the city.

In this area, in a friend's backyard and nestled against the city wall, Guido de Bres had a shed in which he kept his books and documents. In January 1562, shortly after De Bres had left the city, the authorities found the shed and confiscated everything. According to historical records they also found two hundred copies of the newly printed Belgic Confession.

Today only a few parts of the old city wall are left standing. It is impossible to find the place where Guido de Bres kept his books. Yet, it is impressive to walk around the old ruins of the city wall and realize that the Belgic Confession was written here in this area. Today the document is virtually unknown in Doornik itself, yet, it has had a remarkable influence on the faith life of hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

Henry VIII Tower

The final part of our exploration is a visit to the Henry VIII tower. It was in this tower that Guido de Bres was imprisoned for about two weeks after he had been arrested in March 1567. The tower is presently being refurbished. It is closed and surrounded with scaffolding - which only adds to the cold and impregnable impression it makes. What a horrible place to be in! As we walk around the building we try to imagine how it was for Guido de Bres, his colleague Peregrin de la Grange, and a few other brothers, to be held captive within these walls. From letters which De Bres wrote to his wife, we know that various members of the local nobility came to visit him during this time, some to mock him, others to reason with him about his faith, others to show sympathy. On April 11, 1567, De Bres and friends were shipped off to a prison in Valenciennes. Six weeks later, on May 31, they were executed on a scaffold in the main square of Valenciennes.

The Henry VIII tower used to part of the defensive walls around the castle of Doornik. Somewhere, not far from here, on November 1, 1561, Guido de Bres or one of his helpers threw a copy of the Belgic Confession over the wall. It has now been 450 years since that happened. Guido de Bres himself would never have expected that his confession would have such an enormous impact on the history of the Reformed Churches, first in the Netherlands, and then in so many other countries as well. As we commemorate the event this year, we marvel at how God used the actions and writings of this courageous preacher in order to build his church around the world.

Arjan De Visser