

CREEDAL STATEMENTS OF THE REFORMATION: “THE THREE FORMS OF UNITY”

We often hear today that “doctrine divides.” This is certainly true. But it is just as true that “doctrine unites.”

Heidelberg Catechism

As the Reformation spread throughout Europe, Frederick III came to the throne of a region in Germany known as the Palatinate in 1559. He was a ruler who followed the teachings of the Reformers and surrounded himself with wise and godly men. He started a university and invited *Zacharius Ursinus* to be a professor there. Ursinus was a humble but very scholarly man whom Frederick asked to write a catechism to teach the doctrines of God’s Word. He and others completed the work in 1563. It was called the Heidelberg Catechism and was soon recognized as a very warm and clear way to teach the doctrine of God’s Word. It begins by asking, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” It is very personal and touches the heart from the very first question and answer.



Belgic Confession

About this same time the Lord raised up *Guido de Bres* who had studied in Geneva under John Calvin and Theodore Beza. He travelled from town to town preaching the gospel, but also settled to become the preacher in a congregation. His popularity brought severe opposition from the government. As a result, he spent most of his ministry fleeing from persecution. Despite this the Lord provided him with a wife who was willing to stand with him and support him. In his first years of marriage he wrote a very clear and concise statement of what he believed, which was called the Belgic Confession. It was not long before many others adopted it as their own confession of faith. It was printed in 1561 and widely accepted. He was martyred for the cause of Christ at the age of 45.



Canons of Dort

Soon error crept into the Churches of the Netherlands. Jacob Arminius taught that man cooperated with God in salvation and that a man could lose

his salvation. This was alarming, not only to the other ministers, but also to those who gathered to hear the preaching of the Word. A national Synod was called to meet in the city of Dordrecht (Dort), in November of 1618 to answer his teachings and those his followers. Their error was considered so serious that godly men from surrounding nations were invited to deliberate; this gave the Synod an international flavor. The followers of Arminius (called the Remonstrants) wrote out their doctrinal position in five points. The Synod of Dort responded with biblical statements which showed their error. These statements were called the Canons of Dort.

The godly men of that assembly, moderated by *Jobannes Bogerman*, understood the need for the churches to be united in doctrine. They formally



commended these three confessional statements: The Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1619) to the churches. Together they came to be known as The Three Forms of Unity, uniting the reformed churches of the Netherlands in doctrine. These documents continue to define faithful reformed churches, particularly those with roots in Holland.

Although Western Reformed Seminary uses the Westminster Standards as the foundation of instruction for students studying for the gospel ministry, we agree with the Reformation doctrines set forth in these Three Forms of Unity.



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