

The Reformed Faith in Germany and the Netherlands

16th Century Church History — Part 4

Overview

- Three key figures: Zacharias Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus, and Guy de Brès
- Their work produced the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Belgic Confession (1561) — two of the Three Forms of Unity

I. The Reformed Faith Takes Root in Germany

- The Rhenish Palatinate (southwestern Germany; Heidelberg) became the center of German Reformed life
- Frederick III — "Frederick the Elector" (r. 1559–76): godly prince, one of seven Electors of the Holy Roman Empire
- After a formal five-day disputation (June 1560), Frederick concluded the Reformed position was correct
- He chose a catechism as the instrument to build a Reformed church in the Palatinate

II. Caspar Olevianus (1536–87)

- Born in Trier; studied law in France — same path as Calvin; joined underground Protestant movement
- July 1556: boat capsized; Olevianus nearly drowned saving his friend; vowed his life to gospel ministry if spared
- Studied theology under Calvin in Geneva; met Beza, Bullinger, and Peter Martyr
- Returned to Trier (1559); preached justification by faith openly — within weeks, 1/3 of citizens declared for Protestantism
- Arrested for sedition; released through intervention of Frederick the Elector; brought to Heidelberg as pastor
- Later founded the Herborn Academy (1584); published major work on covenant theology; died 1587

III. Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83)

- Disciple of Melancthon and Peter Martyr; recommended to Frederick III as university theologian
- Arrived Heidelberg 1561 — paired well with Olevianus: Ursinus = theological; Olevianus = pastoral

IV. The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

- The Palatinate's official religion had changed three times (1543–1559) — population was confused
- 129 questions; marked by warmth and pastoral comfort
- Opening question: "What is your only comfort in life and in death?"
- Answer: the believer belongs body and soul, in life and death, to Jesus Christ
- Adopted globally; one of the Three Forms of Unity alongside the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort

V. The Reformation in the Netherlands

- Lutheranism failed to take root — its call to obey all civil rulers alienated Dutch subjects under a foreign Catholic king
- Charles V brought the Inquisition (1522); ~1,700 burned (1523–1555); evangelical message spread via printing press
- Philip II intensified persecution — estimated 100,000 killed; yet Reformed faith grew faster than the persecution
- 1566: Wave of iconoclasm; William of Orange led revolt, framing it as political (against tyranny), not religious
- Spain held southern provinces; Calvinist refugees fled north; William of Orange assassinated 1584

VI. Guy de Brès (1522–1567): Preacher, Confessor, Martyr

- Born in southern Belgium; raised Catholic; trained as stained-glass painter; converted ~age 25
- Life of perpetual exile: London (1548–52), northern France (1552–56), Geneva under Beza and Calvin (1556–59)
- Returned 1559; ministered secretly in Tournai — house groups of 6–12, known only as "Jerome"
- Nov. 2, 1561: Threw a copy of his Confession over the castle wall with a letter to Philip II — proving Reformed were not rebels but faithful Christians
- Belgic Confession follows Calvin's French Confession (1559); became one of the Three Forms of Unity
- Arrested April 11, 1567; hanged May 31, 1567 — condemned for celebrating the Lord's Supper
- Last words: "I am condemned to death today for the doctrine of the Son of God, praise be to Him."

Conclusion: Confessional Courage

- All three men believed Reformed faith required public confession, not merely private piety
- The Heidelberg Catechism and Belgic Confession said: this is what we believe, and we will defend it before princes and kings
- The Dutch Reformed Church carried this confessional identity across centuries and oceans