

# THE BELGIC: A “CONFESSION OF THE GOSPEL IN ALL ITS RICHES”<sup>1</sup>

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*The Belgic Confession: A Commentary, Volumes 1 & 2*

David J. Engelsma

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366 & 398 pages, Hardback

The publishing of David Engelsma’s two-volume commentary on the *Belgic Confession* is a welcome event due not only to its meaty content but also to meagre current resources. The historic confession comprises a complete dogmatics in its own right as it follows the usual outline of the loci with the doctrines of the Word, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, ecclesiology and eschatology.

Engelsma maintains, however, that though the confession is doctrinal and systematic, it is not a systematic theology as such but rather “the confession of the gospel in all its riches as this gospel is known by every illumined mind and embraced by every regenerated heart” (2:366-367). That is certainly true in large measure, which in turn makes these two volumes Engelsma’s own dogmatics of sorts. What Berkhof did for Bavinck, he does for Herman Hoeksema.

The professor provides an actual commentary in that his treatment involves a careful analysis and exposition of the revered document’s own words and phrases, with comparisons to Scripture and in contrast to other interpretations. His command of the subject matter—whether of the exegetical, confessional, historical or contemporary sort—is impressive as to its height, depth and breadth. Engelsma knows his stuff and where he stands. Also included are comprehensive indices of Scriptures, creeds and confessions cited voluminously throughout this rock-solid work. The RFPA is to be commended for the release of these handsome volumes.

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<sup>1</sup> This review is reprinted with the permission of Dr. Schuringa and the editor of *Christian Renewal*. Volume 1 (£18) and Volume 2 (£20) of *The Belgic Confession: A Commentary* are available from the CPRC Bookstore ([www.cprc.co.uk](http://www.cprc.co.uk)). P&P in the UK is 10%.

## **Essential and Striking**

Indisputably, for the life-long minister and professor there are no grey areas. In that light, Engelsma should be appreciated as an essential antithetical, or iconoclastic, theologian whose aggressive style (not the content) is somewhat akin to a Jacques Ellul (1912-1994). This reviewer found the commentary never *ad hominem*, sometimes generalizing, but always cutting like a knife rightly dividing the word of truth.

Admittedly, the work would be impossible to swallow for scholars wandering in the wilderness of contextualization who see everything as far too complicated for the “unlearned,” *hoi polloi*, those whom they deem clueless as to academia’s theory that objective truth is, alas, not merely inaccessible but even nonexistent. You may disagree but Engelsma’s certain trumpet sound—albeit often in a minor key—strikes a vital chord for the Reformed ensemble in our discordant times.

For this theologian, the *Belgic Confession* is not some ancient relic that office-bearers dust off and sign on to with a wink and a nod, but a reliable presentation which proves how all biblical doctrine is ever true and truly connected in a coherent system. Since all truth is related, compromising at one point more than threatens the walls of Zion.

And who can deny that relentless, “open-minded” wavering and capitulation have chipped away at the doctrines of Scripture and the sovereignty of God, until the substitutionary blood atonement itself is politely sidestepped, which then demolishes the entire Christian enterprise.

## **Orthodox and Pastoral**

That said, the professor’s John-the-Baptist-like zeal is not only for truth’s sake but also for the believer’s life. Like a loaf of bread fresh from a Dutch oven, the outside may feel crusty, but inside, the warrior is warm and tender for the saints. Not out to impress scholars, Engelsma takes to heart his calling to be a theologian for the people of God.

For example, church members today seem increasingly left in the dark with evermore perplexing questions in the face of sorrow and calamity, sin and evil. And what about pastors who have little more comfort to offer than a

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glib, “I’m here for ya, man,” in the midst of the misery of their sheep? Not that we ever rub a mourner’s nose into Romans 8:28 but Engelsma’s treatment of providence early in the first volume dares to take on the bewildering issues of life, because, well, the Bible does. And sure, there is mystery—more than you can imagine—but it is mystery in the good hands of a sovereign God and eternal Father who truly knows best.

At the other end of the volumes is the professor’s exposition on the end times, which in the confession itself is rather compact. In rolling out the doctrine, his discourse soars with inspiration and even awe as he depicts the certain destruction of the reprobate world, as well as the blessed arrival at last of our Saviour and Lord.

As to everything that falls between, the author delivers profound, as well as helpful, exposition. In getting to the heart of the gospel of justification by faith alone, Engelsma sorts out current discussions and clarifies the relationship of faith to the declarative act of God and the Spirit’s sanctifying work. Whether expounding creation or predestination, the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper or the election of the universal church, his head and heart operate in full gear for those in covenant with God.

### **Meat, Not Milk**

But no human confession or creed may claim infallibility. And Engelsma tackles *Belgic Confession* 36 on the role of the civil government with respect to the church. He reviews the last’s century’s tinkering with the article, and then presents concrete ideas for a gravamen to beef it up once and for all.

All being said, the commentary succeeds in keeping its promise: it demonstrates how our confession is “rich, lovely, and powerful.” Recommended for meat-eating parishioners, students, pastors and theologians.

While every reader will not assent to every point Engelsma propounds, every point he proffers will make every reader think. If you are looking for something to chew on, then take up and dig in. The distinguished offering will feed the flock of God well for generations to come.