

A threefold warning to Reformed Christians when reading their Book of Martyrs

by
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Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord Jesus Christ!

When the publisher kindly requested me to introduce to you this new edition of the *Book of Martyrs*, I sensed, rather than recommending the work with a few platitudes, which would after all be deemed superfluous anyway, if not presumptuous in the case of a book like this, that I ought instead to warn you briefly against a threefold danger that exists with respect to the Book of Martyrs.

In the first place, against the danger that you might have in hand the wrong Martyr's book instead of the genuine one;

then against the danger that you might make an ungodly use of the Book of Martyrs;

and finally, against the danger that the reading of the Book of Martyrs might perhaps testify against you on the day of judgment.

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As for the first danger, you should know that apart from the *Reformed* Book of Martyrs, quite a few other Books of Martyrs are circulating. There are Roman Catholic Books of Martyrs,

¹ Introduction on pages v–xi in an 1883 reprint of the Book of [Protestant] Martyrs by Adriaan van Haemstede, entitled *Geschiedenis der Martelaren die om de getuigenis der evangelische waarheid hun bloed gestort hebben* ([1559] 2nd ed., 1671); 1115 pages, with plates. Translated, with annotations, by Harry Van Dyke.

especially about the so-called Martyrs of Gorcum.² But you must be on guard especially against the Books of Martyrs of the Anabaptists and the Baptists, the wrongness of which is not so immediately apparent because the authors are in the habit of referring to Baptists with the honorific “those baptized according to the ordinance of Christ.”

It is therefore useful to remind you in a few words which is the real *Reformed* Book of Martyrs.

It is not a book that honors only those martyrs who at that time belonged to a church styled Reformed. Our fathers were not that narrowminded.

No, their Book of Martyrs was “Reformed” because it included from all the centuries of the church the memory of those who gave up their fortunes and laid down their lives for the purity of the truth that has so often turned impure, and of those who let their bodies be tortured for the sake of the truth of Christ.

“*Causa*,” says Augustine, “*non passio facit martyrem*” [the cause makes a martyr, not the suffering]. In other words, a martyr is not just anybody who suffers for his beliefs, but only he who suffers loss, shame, and sorrow for the truth. Even atheists have sometimes had the courage to suffer for their terrible convictions; yet no one dreams of perpetuating their memory in a martyr’s book.

We honor martyrs not for their personal strength but solely for the grace which God Almighty glorified in and to and through them and to His church. For this reason a Reformed person cannot recognize any other people as martyrs except those who were

² [*The martyrs of Gorcum*: On 9 July 1572, during the Dutch Revolt against Catholic Spain, militant Calvinists consigned nineteen Catholic clerics to the hangman, against the will of the leader of the Revolt, William of Orange. The martyrs were canonized in 1867.]

tortured for confessing the truth or for bravely standing up for the honor of God.

Now then, the man who compiled such a carefully selected Book of Martyrs for Reformed Christendom was Adriaan van Haemstede, one of the most fervent preachers from the days of the Reformation who faithfully and honorably served the persecuted church in Antwerp and the refugee church in London.

Van Haemstede was certainly not a deep thinker, for he conceded to Anabaptists at the time “that it matters not one way or the other whether the flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ was truly taken from *the flesh and blood of Mary,*” and that one could if necessary be at peace with their error “that our Lord Jesus had received his body through *a new creation* from the Holy Ghost”—an error whereby our salvation through Immanuel would of course entirely collapse.

Van Haemstede had arrived at this position because he had seen so many sincere and devout Anabaptists die for the name of the Lord Jesus. At the time those people did not know any better. The preaching of our Calvinists had not yet penetrated very far, which is why many dear children of God still followed Menno Simons. Van Haemstede sympathized with these martyrs, and instead of separating them from their error he separated himself from those who condemned this error, with the result that in his old age he was altogether alienated from his brothers in the faith.

Fortunately, this did not harm his Book of Martyrs. He compiled this book partly from old histories, partly from trial documents preserved in the archives of various courts, partly from oral history of eyewitnesses.

When he was done he added four more pieces.

1. an exhortation to the Christian authorities, dated at Antwerp in the year 1559;

2. a list of Scripture passages which show that the godly are, and cannot but be, persecuted throughout the ages;
3. a piece about the puffed-up pretensions of papal pride; and
4. a brief epilogue to the Christian reader.

In five years the book was sold out, after which new editions kept appearing, each time with small changes. We cannot be certain who introduced these changes each time. Only Johannes Gijsius, a minister in Streefkerk, signed his full name; two others referred to themselves only as J. S. and J. G. O.

The changes concerned mostly updating the list to include more recent martyrs. Of course, there were always new martyrs. Especially not to be forgotten were the martyrs of St. Bartholomew's Massacre, Valtellina, the Waldensians, and so forth. Thus, new martyrs were regularly added who had since the previous edition sealed their confession of the truth with their blood. Other changes were the chronological sequence, the deletion of a few who had been incorrectly counted among the martyrs, plus a few changes in diction and spelling. And so the last, complete edition of the Reformed Book of Martyrs, edited by J. G. O., was published in 1671 by J. Schippers of the Keizersgracht in Amsterdam.

The complete work has sometimes been referred to as the *Great Book of Martyrs*, but that is a mistake. "The Great Book of Martyrs" was an entirely different work, begun by Mellinus; only the first volume was ever published, in 1686, at Erven Jan Cnobbaert of Antwerp.

Our authentic, trustworthy Book of Martyrs is called: *History or Account of the Martyrs who shed their Blood for their Confession of the Evangelical Truth*, and this Reformed book was never called anything else.

So don't pick up the *Martelaers Spiegel* of Braght,³ nor any other Mirror of Martyrs of which so many have been printed. Rather, see to it that you are presented with the carefully selected, Reformed Book of Martyrs that bears the title also of this new edition.⁴

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The second danger that you should be on guard against is that the Book of Martyrs does not introduce into our Reformed Church the custom of *worshipping saints*.

The martyrs are a cloud of witnesses who “compass us about.” No more, no less. As persons they were no more than we are. Their hearts were inclined as ours are. They too had to wrestle with deliberations of unbelief, with sinful temptations, with indwelling corruption, indeed, like us, with world, death, and devil.

The only difference between them and us is that they lived in different times, that their faith was more fervent, and that it pleased God to accept their sacrifice.

They lived in times when fear filled their souls at the onslaught of tyrannical rulers, sons of Belial who thirst after the blood of

³ [Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martelaers Spiegel der Doops-gesinde* (Amsterdam, 1660). This work documented the religious persecution and martyrdom of Anabaptists. [An English translation of a German edition, entitled *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyrs' Mirror*, was published in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1837. Braght's book did not distinguish between those who were executed for their faith and those who were executed because of their “pacifism,” i.e., their resistance to the lawful authorities.]

⁴ More details about the various editions are found in N. C. Kist and H. J. Royaard, eds., *Archief voor Kerkelijke Geschiedenis, inzonderheid voor Nederland*, 12 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1829–1840), VI, 79ff, as well as in S. de Wind, *Bibliotheek der Nederlandsche Geschiedschrijvers* (Middelburg, 1831–1835), pp. 500ff and the notes.

God's dear children. Fear fired their faith, equipped their souls with wondrous energy, and enabled them, weak though they were in themselves, to stand as mighty men of God. It was ever the sling of faith against the weaver's beam of the Goliaths!

So you mustn't think that these godly folk were not afraid and did not shake and shudder when the halberdiers came to arrest them. Ach no, they too were bruised reeds, trembling before the whirlwind that took them away.

But in those special moments God the Lord poured into them such an extraordinary, wondrous measure of grace that they felt empowered, they knew not how, to undergo the worst.

A martyrs' book is therefore a marvelous exhibit, not of what people were able to do, but of what God can do in godly people, despite their very ungodly unbelief at times.

A Reformed person never wants to glorify the creature, not even when tied to the stake, but while the faggots crackle and hiss, he holds to that deepest of all thoughts: *To God alone be the glory!*

Ridderus already alluded to this in his day when he stated that whoever begins to rely on the blood of the martyrs lowers his esteem for the blood of the Son of God. "If reading such a book," he writes, "were to cause less respect for the blood of Christ, it would be advisable to let the blood of the martyrs remain buried in the ground. But that danger will disappear when the believer has a true view of Christ's blood."⁵

Truly, there was something else in the blood of Christ than in that of the martyrs.

The blood of Christ was a priestly blood that bore the sins of the people. The martyrs did not have that office for us.

⁵ [Franciscus Ridderus (1620-1683) was a Reformed pastor of the Second or Puritan Reformation in the Netherlands who wrote a devotional book about martyrdom called *Bloed-spiegel der Religie* (Rotterdam, 1681).]

The blood of Christ was a promised blood, to atone for transgression. But the blood of martyrs was not promised to us as a means of salvation.

The blood of Christ was foreshadowed by the sacrifices of the Old Testament. But no sacrifices foreshadowed the blood of the martyrs.

The blood of Christ was necessary for our salvation. He *had to suffer all things*. But the blood of the martyrs is not necessary in that way.

The blood of Christ is a blood of the covenant of grace, of which he was the Mediator. But no martyr has been our mediator.

The blood of Christ is the blood of the *New Testament* that was shed for the *forgiveness of sins*. There is nothing like it in the blood of the martyrs.

The blood of Christ was a guarantee. But no martyr has been our guarantor.

The blood of Christ was a purchase price whereby we were *bought with a price*. But no martyr was able to give his blood as a price for us.

The blood of Christ was a redeeming blood whereby He redeemed us as with a ransom. But no martyr would have been able pay a ransom like that: *the ransom is too heavy*.

The blood of Christ was a blood of remission whereby He paid for all our sins, wiping out the record that testified against us, accomplishing everything through the one sacrifice on the Cross. But no martyr has been able by his blood to erase our guilt from God's book.

The blood of Christ was a blood that bore our punishment. He bore for us *in his body the curse and our sins*. But the martyrs did not even suffer punishments for their own sins.

The blood of Christ was an atoning blood. By his death he reconciled us to God while we were yet enemies. But the blood of the martyrs did not have that power.

The blood of Christ is a healing blood. *By his stripes we are healed.* But no martyr has been able to heal his soul through his blood, much less the souls of others.

The blood of Christ is a cleansing blood. *Through his blood he washed away all our sins.* The martyrs could not with their blood wash their souls free of the guilt and stains of sin, much less the souls of others: they themselves had to wash their clothes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The blood of Christ is a nourishing blood. “My blood is drink indeed,” said the Lord, just as his flesh, which he surrendered unto death, is the bread of life. Martyrs could not give their blood to feed and slake the hungry and thirsty souls of men.

The blood of Christ is a pacifying blood. He made *peace through the blood of his Cross.* But no martyr has been a Prince of peace.

The blood of Christ is a blood that triumphed over our spiritual enemies: his crucifixion was a victory. The martyrs too were victorious over their enemies, but not by the power of their own blood *but by the blood of the Lamb.*

The blood of Christ prepares the way to heaven. Through his blood he inaugurated the new, fresh road. The martyrs traveled the road to heaven and pointed it out by example, but they did not prepare and open that road.

The blood of Christ was powerful, even before it had died, to work justification and life. That is why he is called “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” That is why Isaiah and the believers of the Old Testament were healed and received peace. But nothing like that can be said of the blood of the martyrs.

Once people understand and believe the excellencies of the blood of Christ, it will be clear to them that, no matter what is memorialized of the blood of the martyrs, it by no means detracts from the blood Christ, nor does it rob Christ's blood of any of its dignity.

And that is how things stand, beloved Brothers and Sisters! Only the blood of the undefiled Lamb gave martyrs the strength to face their martyrdom. Hence the entire "cloud of witnesses" stands before us as a unique testimony, to count all things in the creature but loss, nay dung—anything that might wish to add to, or subtract from, the godly value of what was fought for and suffered and conquered once for all on Golgotha.

It would therefore insult the memory of the martyrs if one should look upon them as having accomplished something by virtue of their devotion. All their testimonies, after all, come down to this, that Jesus alone is great. All their God-glorifying confessions merge with the ages in one psalm of praise, one hallelujah for Him whose blood alone has set us free.

See to it, therefore, for yourself and for your children, that no misuse of the Book of Martyrs should dishonor the memory of the martyrs.

Read and reread what the martyrs in death throes testified about the blood of Christ. May that pithy and sparkling and yet so simple confession find a grateful echo in your own soul!

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We still have to examine the gravest danger of the three: the Book of Martyrs might testify against you on the day of judgment.

We can be brief. Remember the parable of the talents? "Lord," said the unfaithful servant, "if you had given me three, or five, or

ten talents, I would have made the most of it. But ... one talent? It wasn't worth the effort to do much with it!"

Many people today think that way. "Oh, if the Lord had given me my portion in those years of fierce persecution; if my lot had been to be broken on the wheel or burned at the stake, or if I had faced the axe or the noose, yes, then I would gladly have suffered for the name of the Lord. But now ... those little torments, losing some business or losing some old friends, really, that is too insignificant to arouse enthusiasm and fire up one's spirit.

And so you would condemn yourself. Admiring those who stood their ground in the greater trial, you succumb at the least threat.

That is the oppressive, suffocating nature of our condition.

An apartment that needs to be cleansed must first be turned upside down: all the furnishings have to be removed, beaten and dusted, and then everything can be brought back in, all clean!

Jesus is doing the same today with his deep-sunk church.⁶ Thick cobwebs had once again covered the beams on the ceiling; one could write in the dust on all the furniture; and mold and fungus oozed through the baseboards and the cracks in the walls. It almost seemed that a clean-up would no longer be possible.

And then the Lord began to remove us. Everything is now piled up in the hallways and everybody is personally being dusted off and beaten, so that when the Lord's time has come, all of it will be carried back inside and reinstalled in his sacred dwelling place.

Yet how deep are the believers, already now, not being put to shame by this work of God! He demands almost nothing from them as yet. At most the ejection of a few people. Once in a while

⁶ [Here follow allusions to the ongoing ecclesiastical strife and litigation in the National Church that would lead to the *Doleantie* secession of 1886. —Trans.]

a mocking laugh. Plus the coming need to tithe doubly for once again having to build churches and schools.

Persecution, harsh persecution is in store for us. But it is not yet here. And compared to the murderous scenes of former days it will at most be smooth sailing under a somewhat somber sky.

And yet, look how many are already becoming nervous and anxious, lying low or hiding, not daring to face mockery, and especially ... how poorly they can part with their money!

It was like that also before the Reformation. When ten Flemish pounds were asked for God's cause, collectors would be fobbed off with five. How people cherished their possessions!

But then God in heaven laughed at those possessions and sent out his wrath as a fire, and as his instrument of correction the Duke of Alva. Those same people were evicted from their land and their assets, and they were pursued across the border as penniless heretics.⁷

Today the arm of the Lord is not shortened in the least, and if His people provoke Him for too long with their hesitation and tightfistedness, then we or our children can expect times as in the days of Alva, and things will turn out the same: the first to go will be our "cherished possessions," and then our "cherished blood."

With a bit less hesitation the Lord's people could, already now, rise up in these lands and raise the glorious banner of Christ. But what is lacking is courage, and enthusiasm, and sacred zeal.

To be sure, people are quite willing to leaf through the Book of Martyrs, preferably in the same way they look at the latest news

⁷ [King Philip II of Spain sent Alva to the Netherlands to silence the malcontents in his Dutch provinces, to prosecute rebellious subjects, and to persecute dissenters from the church of Rome. A newly established court in Brussels, the "Council of Troubles," condemned thousands to death while their possessions were confiscated. Many others escaped with their lives by fleeing northward, where, following the Eighty Years' War, the Dutch Republic gained its independence, with the Reformed church as its favored denomination.]

bulletins on crime, to glance at the gruesome illustrations ... while skipping over all those beautiful words, leaving them unread.

Oh, beloved Brother and Sisters, now that Reformed life, by God's special grace, is undergoing a revival among us, let us also be done with that soul-destroying cowardice!

"Reformed" without having *an effect* is a name that contradicts itself. "Reformed" penetrates all of life, puts a wall between us and the world, and binds the glory of our God upon our hearts.

Make use of your Martyrs book, therefore, in such a way that it does not incur judgment. Do not just look at the illustrations, but also listen to what the martyrs *testified*. Read a portion from it every Sunday to your children and your servants.

Above all, apply it to yourself. Imagine for moment that one of those martyrs were to step into your living room: how would you feel, you with your pathetic heart, in the presence of such a blessed hero of faith? It would be painful. But that pain would be wholesome. For whoever then feels the pain will hide with the humble, and the Compassionate One grants grace to the humble.

And when the oppression increases, and you too, from discouragement, will raise the old lament: "Does the Lord not see, and why does He not save us by his strength?" then allow me to borrow the words of Job (12:7) and remind you of "the beasts of the field and the birds of the air." Does the panther not roar with delight as the lamb is captured in his maw and succumbs under his claws?

The fate of the Lord's church can be no other. "The vultures and the hawks preying on the turtledoves!"—that was your image, oh Church of God! And so it still is. And so it will be till the end of days.

Lord, God of mercy, for the sake of thy Son, make us, too, faithful if those deadly anxieties should ever descend upon us.

And with that, my beloved Brothers and Sisters, I hand over to you this old Book of Martyrs in a new format, and I commend myself as a modest servant of the Lord to your love and affection; and I pray that you and your children will guard your souls and fear the Lord your God.

Amsterdam, 18 September 1881

Dr. A. Kuyper