



Protestant Theological University

To declare himself the judge

Huijgen, A.

Published in:

The Belgic Confession: historical background, contextual meaning, contemporary relevance

DOI:

[10.4102/aosis.2023.BK448](https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2023.BK448)

Published: 30/11/2023

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):

Huijgen, A. (2023). To declare himself the judge: the last judgement (article 37). In A. J. Coetsee, S. P. Van der Walt, & D. F. Muller (Eds.), *The Belgic Confession: historical background, contextual meaning, contemporary relevance* (pp. 277-290). (Reformed Theology in Africa Series; Vol. 14). AOSIS (Pty) Ltd.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2023.BK448>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons). You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

This publication might have been made available through the PThU Research Portal under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the PThU website: <https://www.pthu.nl/over-ptthu/bibliotheek-ptthu/diensten/article-25fa-taverne-amendement-end-user-agreement.pdf>

Takedown policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact us providing details, and we will investigate your claim and remove access to the work if necessary: bibliotheek@pthu.nl.

Downloaded from the PThU Research Portal (Pure): <https://pure.pthu.nl>.

To declare himself the judge: The last judgement (Article 37)

Arnold Huijgen

Protestant Theological University,
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

■ Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ernst Troeltsch could still remark that the eschatological office was mostly shut because of a lack of attention, but halfway through the century, Hans Urs von Balthasar noted that it was working overtime (Troeltsch 1925, p. 36; Von Balthasar 1957, p. 403). Meanwhile, many had followed the lead of the dialectic theology of Karl Barth and others by broadening the definition of eschatology from the traditional emphasis on the end times and its specifics of the final resurrection and judgement, heaven and hell, to an eschatology centred on the eternal moment that defines the present by transcending it (see Schwöbel 2022 and, more broadly, Dugan & Ziegler 2022). Eternity, then, relates to time as judgement. Much of 20th-century eschatology has been stamped by the experience of the World Wars, particularly by World War I, but the horizon of 21st-century eschatology is different. Neither the atrocities of war nor the end of the optimistic era of the 19th century define the eschatological interest but the realisation that planet Earth can no

How to cite: Huijgen, A 2023, 'To declare himself the judge: The last judgement (Article 37)', AJ Coetsee, SP van der Walt & DF Muller (eds.), *The Belgic Confession: Historical background, contextual meaning, contemporary relevance*, Reformed Theology in Africa Series, vol. 14, AOSIS Books, Cape Town, pp. 277-290. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2023.BK448.13>

longer accommodate the current modern (particularly Western) lifestyle. The threat of climate change poses an imminent and apocalyptic challenge for humanity. Even in secular terms, it can be defined as a judgement of humanity's hubris, a reckoning long due. Apocalyptic scenarios do not offer much opportunity for comfort, unless one would welcome the destruction or extinction of humanity and the end of the world as we know it as comfort. Movements such as antinatalism, therefore, promote that people should not have children. Donna J Haraway has called to make kin, not babies (Haraway 2016).

Against this background, the eschatological article of the Belgic Confession may belong to the most relevant passages of this document. It aims at comfort for believers in times of need. Written in haste and under threat, amid rapidly changing political and ecclesial circumstances, the Belgic Confession closes with an article on the coming of Jesus Christ as Judge to finally establish his full reign on the earth.

In this chapter, I offer an interpretation of Article 37 of the Belgic Confession based on a double contextualisation: not only the historical and literary contexts of Article 37 are taken into account, but also the present societal and theological contexts. The following steps are taken to this end: firstly, the intimate connection between Article 37 and the previous article on civil government is highlighted (§2); secondly, the theological emphases of Article 37 are examined through a close reading of the text (§3); thirdly, its use of the Bible is explored by an exegetical analysis of the biblical texts cited or alluded to (§4). Fourthly, the theological relevance and limitations of this part of the Belgic Confession are considered and assessed (§5). The article closes with a conclusion (§6).

■ Relation to Article 36

Like the Gospel of John, the Belgic Confession has two endings. The first words of Article 37, '*Finalemēt, nous croyons*' [Finally, we believe], are very similar to the opening statement of Article 36, '*Nous croyons finalemēt*' [We believe finally] (see for the original text Busch 2009). This glitch in the redaction process not only shows the haste with which Guido de Brès drafted this document, but it also indicates that two pieces of text from different origins have been combined here. Article 36 is De Brès's reworking of Articles 39 and 40 of the Gallican Confession, which are the concluding articles of that confession (Gootjes 2007, p. 90). But Article 37 originates from De Brès's reading of Beza's confession (Beza 1955). Chapter 6 of Beza's confession begins with: 'Finally we believe'. The repeated use of the word 'finally' may well be the result of the addition of Article 37 to an earlier draft of the confession, inserted by De Brès after he was able to consult Beza's confession.

Although the Gallican Confession and Beza's confession were published around the same time (May 1559), De Brès may not have had the latter at his disposal right away.

It should be noted that De Brès obviously did not see a substantial difference between the theology of Calvin, which stamped the Gallican Confession, and that of Beza (Balke 2001). Later research has sometimes suggested a major difference between Calvin's biblical and pastoral theology and Beza's more scholastic type of system, but for contemporaries, Calvin's and Beza's theologies were similar (Van Sliedrecht 1996). Of course, De Brès's confession is not free of scholastic tendencies itself, particularly in the opening phrases of the Belgic Confession in Article 1:

We all believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that there is a single and simple spiritual being, whom we call God – eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, unchangeable, infinite, almighty; completely wise, just, and good, and the overflowing source of all good.

Still, Beza was more than merely the paragon of scholastic theology that earlier research made him. His catechism, for instance, also influenced the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), which is clearly not a fruit of scholastic theology (Davis 2014, p. 257; Hollweg 1961). Still, it should be admitted that the divine decree features prominently in Beza's confession (Gootjes 2007, p. 91), in the opening chapter as well as in the chapters on God the Father as Creator and on the creation of man. While De Brès's Belgic Confession does not share this strong emphasis on God's decree, Article 37 nonetheless emphasises election repeatedly (see §3).

The juxtaposition of Articles 36 and 37 results in a recalibration of the Calvinistic view on the civil magistrates. The article on civil government is not the final word in the Belgic Confession, although it is in the Gallican Confession as well as in Calvin's *Institutes*. This implies that no government can speak the word or execute the last judgement. In terms later coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1998, pp. 137-162), the civil magistrates belong to the penultimate, whereas Christ's judgement is the ultimate. This limits the task and authority of any temporal government. Meanwhile, tension arises between the tasks of the civil magistrate and Christ's judgement, as De Brès famously wrote:

And their office is, not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of the antichrist may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted. (Art. 37)

Remarkably, the destruction of the kingdom of the antichrist does not reappear in the final article on Christ's judgement, although it would have made sense to underline that it is not the civil government but Christ who

conquers the antichrist finally. It is therefore unclear whether De Brès realised what the effect would be of placing a final article on eschatological judgement after the article on civil government. Meanwhile, in the architecture of the text as such, the final article bears on the interpretation of the article before. Wim Verboom has argued that while Article 36 pictures the church in this world as raising up signs of the kingdom of God in the present reality, the church of Article 37 is the pilgrim, making their way through the world to the kingdom of God (Verboom 2001, p. 82). This contrast may be a little overstated, as in Article 36, the church only comes into view through the lens of the civil magistrates, who have a responsibility to create and maintain the circumstances in which the church may flourish. This does not imply that the church itself raises up signs of Christ's presence in a more or less triumphant way. That would probably be alien to the mind of De Brès, who experienced how the Reformed church was threatened by the civil magistrates.

■ Close reading

A close reading of the text of Article 37 demonstrates some remarkable emphases by De Brès concerning eschatology.

■ Judicial focus

The main statement of Article 37 is that Jesus Christ will come to perform the office of a judge. There is no trace in this article of the way Christ was pictured in Article 21, as the one who sacrificed himself (*'grand Sacrificateur'*) by offering himself on the tree of the cross. True consolation and comfort are found, according to that article, in his wounds, so the believers 'have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God than this one and only sacrifice'. In Article 21, Christ is on the other side of the judicial process, 'condemned as a criminal by Pontius Pilate', although he was, in fact, innocent. In Article 37, however, Christ's weakness, wounds and sacrifice have no place. This is remarkable, because in the Bible, Christ's wounds and his judgement are closely tied. Christ as Judge is pictured as the Lamb who still bears the wounds of being slain (Rv 5:6). Of course, this is important for the actual judgement situation: both for the ungodly, who inflicted these wounds on him, as well as for the godly, who find comfort in his wounds. This shows in the Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer (QA) 52 on the statement from the creed that Christ will come to judge the quick and the dead:

In all distress and persecution, with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgement of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me. (QA 52)

Obviously, the fact that no explicit reference is made to Christ's sacrifice and his being condemned by Pontius Pilate should not be overstated. But this is not the only remarkable aspect of Christ's activity as judge in Article 37. De Brès interprets the trumpets of the archangels (1 Th 4:16) as people being 'summoned' as if by a subpoena. Moreover, Christ's judgement is purely a judgement based on works. 'The dead will be judged according to the things they did in the world, whether good or evil'. No reference is made to God's grace or forgiveness. Rather, the godly 'will receive the fruits of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered; their innocence will be openly recognized by all'. Of course, De Brès has developed a Reformed doctrine of justification in Article 23, but no trace of that doctrine is found in his article on the final judgement. Rather, the godly are declared just because they are, in fact, innocent and just. One can understand this as a result of God's grace in justification, but as it stands, the language is rather analytic and the judgement based on works. Besides, 'their cause' (De Brès continues the judicial language) 'will be acknowledged as the cause of the Son of God'. So, the judge also has a stake in the judicial process at the end of times: his cause will prevail.

While the Belgic Confession obviously served as a Reformed confession of faith, there is reason to consider which part of Article 37 would be unacceptable for Roman Catholic authorities and believers. De Brès's context is important in this respect. De Brès spent much of his life opposing the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand and the Anabaptist radicals on the other (De Brès 1555, 1565). One of the main drivers for his writing of the Belgic Confession is to demonstrate to the civil authorities that the Reformed should not be equated with these Anabaptists. To that end, he moves relatively close to the Roman Catholic Church in areas in which he wishes to distance himself from the Anabaptists. For instance, the Anabaptist appeal to the inner light instead of the authority of the Holy Scriptures is countered by De Brès in the extensive articles on the Scriptures (Art. 3-7). In these articles, De Brès shows remarkable openness for the deuterocanonical or apocryphal writings that the Roman Catholic Church accepted in the canon: 'The church may certainly read these books and learn from them as far as they agree with the canonical books' (Art. 6; cf. Huijgen 2012, p. 117). Moreover, he does not deny that the authority of the church is relevant to establishing the authority of the canonical books of the Bible, although the testimony of the Spirit and the testimony of the Bible itself are more important:

We receive all these books [...] not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God. (Art 6)

Of course, in the doctrine of justification and ecclesiology, the front against which De Brès writes is the Roman Catholic Church, but in matters of the authority of Scripture and the relation between civil government and the eschatological judgement, De Brès aims primarily at proving that the Reformed are no Anabaptists. Article 36 makes clear that Reformed believers respect the power of the civil authorities, even when they wield the sword to promote the right religion. In other words, the Reformed will not take up the sword to overturn all authority as the Anabaptists had in their revolt in 1534 Münster, which stamped the consciousness of Europe in much the same way that the attacks of 11 September 2001 are the benchmark for violence in the 21st century, at least in the West. So De Brès does not seem to have a problem with a judgement according to works, at least in Article 37. Still, there is one typically Reformed aspect in De Brès's picture of the last judgement: election.

■ Election

De Brès writes on behalf of smaller groups of Reformed Christians who face ever more persecution from those in power. They are 'at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil officers' (Art. 37). God will punish 'the evil ones who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world'. The undertones of pain and persecution can hardly be overlooked when these passages are read.

De Brès consistently pictures the godly as the elect. The Lord will come 'when the number of the elect is complete'. The other two times he refers to the godly, he also calls them elect: the judgement is 'very pleasant and a great comfort to the righteous and elect', and 'the faithful and elect will be crowned with glory and honor'. The godly are counted righteous by their works and are faithful to their calling, but above all: they are elect [*es/eus*]. Within the context of the entire Belgic Confession, this obviously refers to Article 16 on election. De Brès pictures election in an infralapsarian way and notes that works are not taken into account. While 'all Adam's descendants' had fallen 'into perdition and ruin', 'God showed himself to be as he is: merciful and just'. He is merciful because he saves:

From this perdition those who, in the eternal and unchangeable divine counsel, have been elected and chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord by his pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. (Art. 37)

Remarkably, not only human persons are elect, but the Son of God will profess the names of the elect 'before God his Father and the holy and elect angels'. So, even angels are elect. This shows that De Brès mentions election wherever he can in Article 37.

In the later debates concerning the five points of the Remonstrants, this text played an important role, combined with Article 37 of the Belgic Confession. The Reformed underlined that election not only means God's eternal and unchangeable decree to save believers and to condemn unbelievers: God does not take anything into account, and he does not elect a certain type of persons, but a specific number of persons (Canons of Dort I.10). For this argumentation, a phrase from Article 37 proved important: 'that when the time appointed by the Lord is come (which is unknown to all creatures) and the number of the elect is complete'. The former phrase is obviously biblical (e.g. Mt 24:36-44), but the latter is not. It seems that Christ can only come once a specific number is met, but it is difficult to underpin this based on the Bible.

■ The role of conscience

For De Brès, human conscience plays a major role in the last judgement. He mentions it twice in Article 37. Firstly, 'the books (that is, the consciences) will be opened, and the dead will be judged'. Secondly, '[t]he evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences'. Both citations are problematic. The first obviously refers to Revelation 20:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. (v. 12)

These 'books' are obviously sources of knowledge, but the biblical text provides no hint that the consciences are meant, as if every individual conscience would serve as a book to be opened. Leaving aside what the meaning of the biblical text actually is, it is clear that De Brès adds something to the interpretation that is obviously important to him: the human conscience, once opened, testifies the truth. This presupposes an understanding of conscience as an objective registrar of all deeds, words and thoughts, including the goodness or badness of these. Therefore, in the second phrase De Brès uses, the ungodly are convicted 'by the witness of their own consciences'. Within the judicial framework that dominates De Brès's Article 37, the conscience of the wicked serves as witness for the prosecution.

De Brès's confidence in conscience as witness can be demonstrated by two other articles in the Belgic Confession. In the article on justification (Art. 23), De Brès wrote that the obedience of Christ crucified is 'enough to cover all our sins and to make us confident, freeing the conscience from the fear, dread, and terror of God's approach'. For if we had to appear before God relying 'on ourselves or some other creature, then, alas, we would be swallowed up'. So De Brès knows that conscience can accuse a person, but he notes that Christ's righteousness sets the conscience free. A similar

expression is found in the next article, on sanctification: 'our poor consciences would be tormented constantly if they did not rest on the merit of the suffering and death of our Savior' (Art. 24). So, it is only because of Christ's merit that the consciences are not tormented constantly. But the sum total of De Brès's estimation of conscience seems to fall short from a pastoral perspective. It seems that if one's conscience accuses the person, then the person is not resting on Christ's merit and possibly belongs to those who are lost forever. In short, there seems to be no comfort once conscience accuses. Any accusation is true, and any true accusation leads to condemnation. On the other hand, believers may rest assured with a conscience that does not condemn them. But this image of a conscience that does not alarm the person seems to fit the biblical image of the Pharisee better than it does the Reformed Christian, at least in practice.

■ Separation

The Belgic Confession's article on eschatology may strike modern readers as strongly individualistic. The judgement takes place by way of opening the consciences and hearing the testimonies of consciences, which are, of course, bound to individuals. One cannot be condemned on the basis of someone else's conscience. So, the focus is on the individual, who either belongs to the elect or to the ungodly. Corporate and collective aspects are not completely absent from the Belgic Confession, however. The climactic final sentence uses the first-person plural instead of singular: 'So we look forward to that great day'. Meanwhile, the main focus is on the eternal destination of individuals, not on the renewal of creation or the peace that the kingdom of God will bring. 'All people will give account' and all 'secrets and hypocrisies of all people will be publicly uncovered in the sight of all'. So the individual is shamed in front of all humanity. The focus of Article 37 remains primarily individual.

Christ's judgement will lead to a separation between 'the wicked and evil people' on the one hand and 'the righteous and elect' on the other. For the former, God's judgement is horrible and dreadful, but for the latter, it is 'very pleasant and a great comfort'. The reasons for this comfort are: (1) their total redemption will be accomplished; (2) they will receive the fruits of their labour; (3) their innocence will be openly recognised by all; and (4) they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring on the evil ones. This fourth aspect seems more problematic than the other three, because it seems that the elect will find pleasure and comfort in the vengeance inflicted on other people. Not only do they rejoice in their own safety or in God's righteousness, but particularly in God's vengeance on others. The question is, of course, whether this is biblical and whether this fits those who are saved by grace through Jesus Christ. It is not entirely clear whether

the elect will find pleasure in God's vengeance on all the nonelect or only on those 'who tyrannized, oppressed, and tormented them in this world'. In other words, are only the worst ungodly, the tyrants, subjected to God's vengeance, or does this apply to all the wicked people? What follows seems to apply to all the nonelect:

The evil ones will be convicted by the witness of their own consciences, and shall be made immortal – but only to be tormented in 'the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'. (Art. 37)

This is a quotation from Matthew 25:41, applying to all those on the Lord's left hand, who are sent into the eternal fire. The Belgic Confession seems to imply that at least part of the pleasure and comfort of at least some of the elect consists in the eternal torment of fellow human beings. For many modern readers, that will be a disturbing thought, but the question also remains whether this idea has a biblical basis. That remains to be seen.

■ Biblical texts

A distinction can be made between texts that are explicitly quoted in the text of Article 37 of the Belgic Confession and texts referred to in the margins of the original edition. The cited texts are 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Revelation 20:12, Matthew 12:36, Matthew 25:41, Revelation 3:5 and Revelation 7:17; 21:4. The text from the letter to the Thessalonians uses apocalyptic imagery (Wanamaker 1990, p. 172). The 'trumpet of God' is an image that occurs rather frequently in the Old Testament in contexts of eschatological judgement (cf. Ex 19:16, 19; Is 27:13; Jl 2:1). The trumpet calls the dead to life that they may appear before the judgement seat of God (Friedrich 1964, pp. 86–88). In this light, De Brès's interpretation that people are summoned for the judgement seat of Christ is in line with the main tenets of this biblical text.

The texts most referred to in Article 37 of the Belgic Confession are in large part taken from the Gospel of Matthew and the book of Revelation. To the mind of the present author, the Gospel of Matthew fits the intentions of De Brès better than many of the other biblical witnesses because there is no other gospel in which the judgement according to works is accentuated as much as it is in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew emphatically places the Sermon on the Mount, which is the constitution of the kingdom of God, at the beginning of his gospel, and he returns to it at the end of the gospel when Jesus brings his disciples together on the mountain where Jesus had taught them, a clear allusion to the mountain where Jesus preached (Mt 28:16; cf. Mt 5:1). He commissions them to go and make disciples among the nations, 'teaching them to obey everything I commanded you' – another allusion to the Sermon on the Mount. While the Gospel of Matthew shares

the parable of the wedding banquet with the Gospel of Luke, it is only in Matthew's gospel that the king notices one of the guests who is not wearing wedding clothes. The man is tied hand and foot and thrown outside, 'into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Mt 22:13). What does it mean not to wear wedding clothes? Most probably, it means not living in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount. The same holds true for the parable of the ten virgins, five of whom run out of oil before the bridegroom arrives (Mt 25:1-13). This parable is close to the passage on the separation of the sheep and the goats, which is quoted in Article 37 of the Belgic Confession. In this parable, the judgement according to works is obvious (Mt 25):

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me'. (vv. 34-36)

De Brès cites the first part of what is said to those on the left-hand side of the king: 'Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"' (Mt 25:41). The other text De Brès quotes from Matthew concerns the account everyone will have to give on the day of judgement for every empty word they have spoken (Mt 12:36). The context of this biblical verse is concerned with the separation between the good and the evil: good trees give good fruit, and good people bring good things out of the good stored up in them, but bad trees deliver bad fruit, and bad people bring evil things. 'For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned' (Mt 12:37).

Obviously, the book of Revelation plays an important role in Article 37 of the Belgic Confession, as it counts as depicting the last judgement and the resulting future states of heaven and hell.

Revelation 20:12 is a crucial text in Article 37, as it marks the transition from the depiction of the stage of the last judgement to the actual execution of judgement: 'Then the books [that is, the consciences] will be opened, and the dead will be judged according to the things they did in the world, whether good or evil'. Earlier, it was remarked that De Brès emphasises that the books are, in fact, human consciences. A closer reading of the biblical text not only demonstrates that this equation is unlikely but also that De Brès's beloved theme of election would have been close at hand had he left human consciences out. Revelation 20 mentions 'the book of life', in which the names of Christians were written. 'Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire'

(Rv 20:15). This same book is mentioned in Revelation 3:5, a verse which De Brès cites in part:

The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. (Art. 37)

De Brès only cites the latter phrase, expanding it with the holiness and elect nature of the angels, but he does not connect election to the book of life. It is not clear why. Could it be that the mere suggestion that someone's name could, in principle, be blotted out from the book of life was problematic? But this statement may well be read as underscoring the surety of God's election.

Exegetically, the book of life has its background both in the Old Testament and in Hellenistic literature. In Exodus 32:32-33, Moses begs for God's forgiveness for Israel after the history with the golden calf. If God will not forgive, 'then blot me out of the book you have written'. As Grant R. Osborne observes, 'Later apocalyptic ideas associated this register with eternal life and fellowship with God' (Osborne 2002, p. 180). That this book is mentioned in the letter to Sardis is no coincidence, as this long-time capital of the Persian and Seleucid Empires served as a repository for such records. The removal of a name from such records counted as a grave shame. Deuteronomy 29:20 associates the removal of a name with capital punishment. To be erased and forgotten is a severe penalty. So, in fact, the opening of the books in Revelation refers to one's name being recorded among those who belong to God's people, subsidiary to the good or evil deeds carried out by those included or excluded. While De Brès's addition of the idea that the books are consciences remains implausible, his emphasis on a judgement according to works is not alien to the exegesis of the Book of Revelation.

Revelation 7:17 and 21:4 both state that God will wipe away the tears from the faces of believers. The Greek verb used for 'wiping away' is a very strong verb with connotations of destroying or obliterating. But why were these Christians crying? The contextual answer is because of the tribulations and persecutions they have been suffering: 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Rv 7:14). The question is whether these same connotations are present in Revelation 21, where the new heaven and the new earth are pictured. The sorrows from which the people are relieved seem of a more general nature, connected to the human condition as such: 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' (Rv 21:4). The connection between the removal of death and the wiping away of tears can be retraced to the Old Testament. Isaiah 25 reads:

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. (vv. 6–8)

So wiping away all tears is centred on death being swallowed up in victory, and it leads to the restoration of Israel, acknowledged by all nations. Obviously, De Brès could not have taken all these nuances into account, even if he would have discerned them.

The final aspect of De Brès's use of the Bible to be discussed here is angelology. The first text he quotes is 1 Thessalonians 4:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. (v. 16)

That the angels are elect can be derived from 1 Timothy 5:21. It is not unfitting for the final article, on the last judgement, to emphasise the role of angels, given the prominent place the angels hold in the book of Revelation. Theologically, however, their role remains unclear.

■ Theological considerations

Many years have passed since De Brès wrote the Belgic Confession. Since then, it has found its way among the forms of unity of various Reformed churches in the Dutch tradition. Given the change in context, the question is legitimate as to what extent the formulations of the Belgic Confession need to be updated, the content supplemented or even altered. This is not an unfitting question for a Reformed theologian to address, as the Reformers themselves were definitely not directors of a museum (Barth 2004, p. 181). Moreover, the 20th century has shown a development of new avenues in eschatology that may provide useful insights.

The Belgic Confession's approach to the last judgement is undoubtedly Christocentric, in that Christ as judge is the central figure who separates the elect and the ungodly. Meanwhile, the connection between Christ the Judge and Christ the Saviour could be stronger, as it is in the Heidelberg Catechism, for instance. Question 52 asks: 'How does Christ's return "to judge the living and the dead" comfort you?' Part of the answer is: 'I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgement of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me'. The judge is the one who has been judged in lieu of the believer. As mentioned above, such a connection between Christ the Judge and Christ the Saviour is absent from the Belgic Confession.

That the present author would wish for such an emphasis in the current context is, of course, an effect of the ‘century of eschatology’, of biblical scholars Johannes Weiß and Albert Schweitzer, and of systematic theologians Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth. In this century, the last things became first (Schwöbel 2000). The eschatological focus shifted from the *eschata*, via the *eschaton*, to the *eschatos*. Earlier generations of theologians showed great interest in the phenomena surrounding the end of the world, the coming of Christ and heaven and hell: the ‘last things’ or *eschata*. More and more, an awareness arose that the Christian message not only declares some end to the present world but, moreover, a qualitatively different reality: the Kingdom of God, the *eschaton*. But within the *eschaton*, Christ is the central figure. He is the ‘*eschatos*’, the last man (1 Cor 15:45), on whom all of eschatology hinges.

The Christological concentration in large parts of 20th-century theology may well cohere with confusion concerning the concrete ‘*eschata*’. The 16th-century language of the ‘horrible and dreadful [judgement] to wicked and evil people’, followed by their receiving immortality, ‘but only to be tormented in the eternal fire’, understandably leads to confusion once one asks whether one’s friendly neighbours, children or parents may be among them. For De Brès, the situation was clear, the wicked identifiable, as the hypocrites can be easily discerned from the godly (Article 29).

Still, De Brès’s emphasis on ultimate justice being done remains an important aspect of Christian doctrine, a consolation, particularly for those who suffer at the hands of the cruel.

■ Conclusion

The following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The addition of the article on the last judgement puts the article on civil government into perspective: the civil magistrate cannot bring the eschatological deliverance needed for the world.
2. Article 37 is stamped by a judicial focus: that Christ comes to judge is the main emphasis. The judgement takes place based on works. De Brès emphasises the separation between the elect and the ungodly, evil people.
3. The Belgic Confession gives a prominent place to conscience, which is the source of knowledge of one’s salvation or damnation. This is not based on the biblical texts cited, and its pastoral results are questionable.
4. The Belgic Confession’s focus on the salvation or damnation of the individual is not merely individualistic but lacks attention for the renewal of creation that is present in the Bible and that is more prominent in present-day eschatological reflection.

5. The biblical texts to which Article 37 of the Belgic Confession refers support the idea of a judgement based on works (e.g. the quotations from the Gospel of Matthew).
6. The texts De Brès quotes from the book of Revelation show a potential for comfort, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead.
7. In present-day theology, and by the present author, the need is felt more urgently than in De Brès's days to stress the identity of Christ the Judge and Christ the Saviour. The question is how 21st-century theology can accommodate concrete eschatological phenomena.