

92. THE TROUBLED YEAR OF 1566

It is 5 April 1566, and busy in the streets of Brussels.

You can hear the buzz of many excited voices. The people jostle with each other to see better. Many faces wear hopeful expressions. Here and there, people laugh cheerfully.

Suddenly someone calls:

"Here they come!"

The hum of voices from those thousands of people hushes.

Solemn and dignified, conscious of their dignity, a long row of nobles draws near in their elegant outfits. The two nobles leading the procession are well-known to the people. Even the children know their names. They are Henry of Brederode and Louis of Nassau. Henry of Brederode was a prominent nobleman who intensely hated Roman Catholic theology. Therefore he chose the side of the Protestants with deep conviction. Louis of Nassau was a younger brother of Prince William of Orange. Behind them, occasionally chatting, three hundred nobles calmly follow. Silently the people watch that long procession pass them, and many hearts beat with great expectation.

THE NOBLES PETITION

The nobles are going to the palace of the governess, Margaret of Parma. The procession walks peacefully through the palace gate, and



Prince Louis of Nassau
Portrait by Adriaen Thomasz Key

soon they stand before the haughty governess. But this crafty woman is very nervous. She trembles. Her hands shake. One of the Privy Council members, a certain Berlaumont, also a Spaniard,

notices the confusion of the governess.

Remember the Council of State and the Privy Council assisted Margaret? The Council of State consisted of the governors who ruled the various provinces, while the Privy Council consisted entirely of Spaniards, with

Cardinal Granvelle as chairman. Now Barlaumont tries to encourage the governess. He says scornfully:

"Madam, why should you be afraid of these people? They are only Beggars."

Henry of Brederode hears those sarcastic words but does not respond, although he remembers them. Very politely, he offers Margaret a rolled sheet of paper. She accepts it and opens it with trembling hands. Amid the breathless stillness of all those present, she reads its contents. It is a petition signed by three *thousand* nobles. Three *hundred* nobles would personally present it to the governess — one from every ten. They respectfully ask the governess to send a few high-placed people to King Philip II in Spain. These men must tell the king about the miserable conditions in The Netherlands and ask if he will withdraw the severe placards. They must ask him if he will abolish or at least discontinue the cruel, inconsiderate Inquisition so that the terrible persecutions will end.

This summarises the contents of this petition.

What will the governess answer? She cannot give an immediate answer. She first wants to consider this request calmly. Besides, she also wants to ask the advice of those who assist her in the government. So she requests a few days to think about it and asks the nobles to return in three days. This is a very reasonable request, and the nobles do not have any objections. They will



Henry of Brederode

return in three days. Calm and dignified, they leave again.

Slowly the people also disperse, and everyone goes home. But their hearts are hopeful! They are sure that this will help. Of course! It *has* to!

ROMAN CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS WORK TOGETHER

But what is all this about?

It was seven years ago that King Philip II had returned to Spain. Yet the state of affairs remained unchanged. The violent persecution raged undiminished. The stakes continued to smoke. Margaret, the governess, did not listen to the governors in the Council of State, who were better acquainted with the conditions in The Netherlands. She always listened to the Privy Council, which consisted of only Spaniards.

True, Granvelle, the Privy Council chairman, had returned to Spain permanently. That proud, ambitious cardinal could no longer dictate the law

to Margaret of Parma. He had actually ruled because everything he suggested took place. The governess listened to him in everything. Naturally, the governors didn't like that at all. Finally, the quarrels and disagreements got so bad that the governess requested her brother Philip II to recall Granvelle. The king granted her request, and in 1564, Granvelle left Brussels. Supposedly, he was stressed and had to rest, but in reality, he left The Netherlands permanently. They pretended he was on sick leave. As he left, the street boys of Brussels gleefully sang:

"And he won't come back again!"

It was true too!

However, the people were sadly disappointed in their expectation that things would now improve. Nothing changed. The oppression and persecution continued unabated.

Finally, a spirit of resistance began to grow among the people. The people had been silent for over forty years and patiently endured constant persecution. But things were changing. The people became restless. Something would



Henry of Brederode presents the petition to Margaret of Parma on behalf of 3000 Nobles. 1566. Wikimedia

explode if things didn't change soon because the people's patience was almost exhausted. The nobles saw that coming, and they feared it because once the pent-up hatred burst, where would it end? Besides, *they* were also dissatisfied because, after the departure of Granvelle, the governess kept listening to the Spaniards and not at all to them. That's why they made an agreement in 1566. Many Roman Catholic nobles also joined the Alliance of the Nobles. For this, the Roman Catholics and Protestants worked together. More than three thousand nobles drafted that petition, and they all signed it. Henry of Brederode and Louis of Nassau were the leaders of the Alliance of the Nobles.

Consistories of the various Protestant churches in The Netherlands had also made an alliance. That was the 'Alliance of the Consistories' or as it is also called 'The Alliance of the Church Councils'. More than four hundred consistories united.

The powerful merchants of the rich commercial city of Antwerp also supported that alliance. They

offered the king three million florins if he stopped the persecutions.

That's why hope had flared in the people's hearts because now the king would realise that it was not only a few stirrers asking, but the *whole nation*!

And now, on 5 April 1566, that petition is formally presented to Governess Margaret in Brussels.

Three days later, the nobles returned to hear her answer. They were received quite kindly. The governess said she would forward the petition to the king in Spain because the king had to decide on such important matters. She would send two prominent nobles to Spain to discuss it with the king. Naturally, this would take some time. So, while waiting for the king's answer, the governess promised to moderate the level of persecution. No wonder the nobles went home with hope in their hearts!

They adopted the nickname 'Beggars', which had scornfully been given them by Barlaumont, as a



Alliance of nobles, painted by Edouard de Bièfve, 1841

name of honour. They had been ridiculed as Beggars. Very well, they did not object!

They remained faithful to the king; they only *begged* for rest and peace. They *begged* for an end to the persecution.



Gold coated Silver Beggars Medal
1566. Wikipedia

They had a Beggars medal struck, and every Beggar wore one of those medals around their neck. But it wasn't long

before that became a hazardous name of honour, and wearing that Beggar's medal cost many lives. But more about that later. At the time, the nobles didn't know that. Things were looking good. Would it help? Would the king listen? Of course, it *had* to help!

FIELD PREACHING

It is a few months later and midsummer. The little town of Overveen is situated close to Haarlem. On 21 July 1566, just outside that village, things are hectic. Many people have come together there,

and more keep arriving. Yet there is no bustling or lots of noise, which is normal when hundreds of people are together. Thoughtfully and quietly, the people sit on the grass. They placed their wagons in a large circle around their group and joined them with branches of trees or boards. Those wagons form a protective wall around a large open space. The people left openings between some of the wagons through which they could enter the enclosure. A few armed men stand guard at those openings. Soon the space within the circle of wagons is filled with hundreds, no, *thousands* of people, both young and old. But all those people are quiet because what they will do here is dangerous. They have come together to listen to *field preaching*! What is that? Listen!

Remember that three hundred nobles had presented a petition to the governess, which more than three thousand nobles had signed. Four hundred consistories and many wealthy merchants had united to support that alliance. Margaret of Parma had promised to forward that petition to the king in Spain, along with several prominent nobles, to discuss it with the king. Respectfully but urgently, they had asked the king to stop the persecutions, which had lasted more than forty years.



Cross-eyed Gerrit preaching. He had a bodyguard of 50 men to protect him from the Inquisition.
<https://www.utrechtaltijd.nl/>



Margaret of Parma

And now hope lived in the people's hearts, for the governess had promised to moderate the persecution. But they had not noticed any signs of moderation during the last few months of waiting! The murdering of 'heretics' kept going as usual. The only difference was that the killings of

those 'disobedient ones' did not happen in public as much, but in secret. The people mockingly said: "The governess has promised 'moderation', but we could better call it 'murderation'"! They were right!

Yet hope continued to live in their hearts because the king in Spain had not answered yet. The two prominent nobles, Berghen and Montigny, who had travelled to the king in Madrid, the Spanish capital, had not returned either. When the answer comes, it is sure to be in their favour! The people didn't doubt the king would grant them their friendly request. That's why the people acted *as if a favourable answer had already arrived!*

The people had become more courageous. They

now risked doing what they had not dared to do a few months ago. All over the country, ministers delivered public sermons in the open fields. Various preachers travelled around and preached in the cities and villages. From far and near, the people flocked to the places where the ministers would preach. Those travelling preachers were often students of Calvin. Many had studied at the university in Geneva.

It began in Flanders, in the south. In June, the first public sermons were delivered in Antwerp and Oudenaarde, two cities in present Belgium. Herman Modet had spoken there. The people in the north soon followed this example.

A few other preachers were John Arentson, a simple basket maker from Alkmaar, and Peter Gabriel, a former monk God had converted and who had escaped from the monastery.

When Governess Margaret heard about the field preaching, she was shocked! How dare those impudent heretics do that! That was unheard of! She would soon put a stop to that. Just imagine! That went too far!

Placards appeared against those public field meetings, strictly forbidding them.

Margaret sent letters to the administration of those cities stating that they were not allowed to permit such a thing but take strong measures against it. If they discovered field preaching occurring in the outer suburbs of their city, the administration must scatter that meeting and severely punish the guilty.

And?

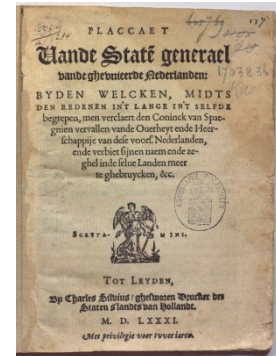
Were the people frightened by those threats?

No, they did it anyway. They did not allow threats to stop them from listening to those sermons

where the speaker spoke from God's Word to the people's hearts. But from then on, they went to 'church' armed and, for safety, put a large circle of wagons around the place of

assembly. They joined those wagons together to strengthen them for extra protection as they formed an enclosure, a wall, around the listeners. They could defend themselves if soldiers came to chase them away or kill them. The city administrators felt powerless. They did not dare to send out their soldiers against those open-air services because that might start a dangerous revolt.

Besides, the city governments could not trust their own soldiers because they also went to listen. The civil authorities realised very well that if they drastically interfered, the increasing bitterness of the people would turn against them.



Blood-placards
against the
believers

"The governess has promised 'moderation', but we could better call it 'murderation'!"

FIRST OPEN-AIR SERVICE IN OVERVEEN

On this warm day in July, the people had organised field preaching in an open space near Overveen, close to Haarlem. Thousands of people flocked together. Now we understand why those people were not noisy. They are doing something the government had most strictly forbidden and can bring death if anyone discovers them. It was no feast; it was bitterly serious.

Yet even with such danger looming, the desire to hear God's Word preached was greater than the fear of severe punishment. Despite all, they came. They had even come from Amsterdam. Many from the surrounding towns had already gone to Haarlem the day before. Then they did not have to travel very far on the day of the field preaching and were sure to be there on time. Many of them found accommodation with relatives or friends. They counted on the fact that the city gates would open early the following day, so they would have plenty of time to walk to Overveen.

But that did not happen. The authorities of Amsterdam had warned those of Haarlem that the heretics had planned a field service at Overveen. So the rulers of Haarlem ordered that the city gates remain closed. That did not stop the young people! They climbed over the wall, dived into the moat, swam to the other side, or took a boat across. On this warm day in July, their clothes

would dry soon enough. But older people and women could not do that. They crowded together before the closed gates, and finally, the waiting multitude took on such a threatening attitude that the magistrates, fearing a mutiny, finally had the gates opened. The crowd squeezed through the narrow gate opening and hastened to where the field preaching would be.

While those already present waited, they bought and sold forbidden books and pamphlets to all who wanted them. Finally, the preacher, Peter Gabriel, a short, thin man, ascended the speaker's platform. Of course, there was no normal pulpit but a wooden elevation somebody had hammered together. Sometimes a preacher stood on a covered wagon.

Peter Gabriel holds up his hand, and it becomes dead silent. He begins the service with a short prayer, asking for the Lord's preservation in this hour, if the Lord will open His Word to them and for the preaching to be a rich blessing for many. Then he announces which psalm to sing. It is one of the well-loved psalms of Datheen. The lusty singing of that psalm, coming from thousands of throats, is audible far in the distance.

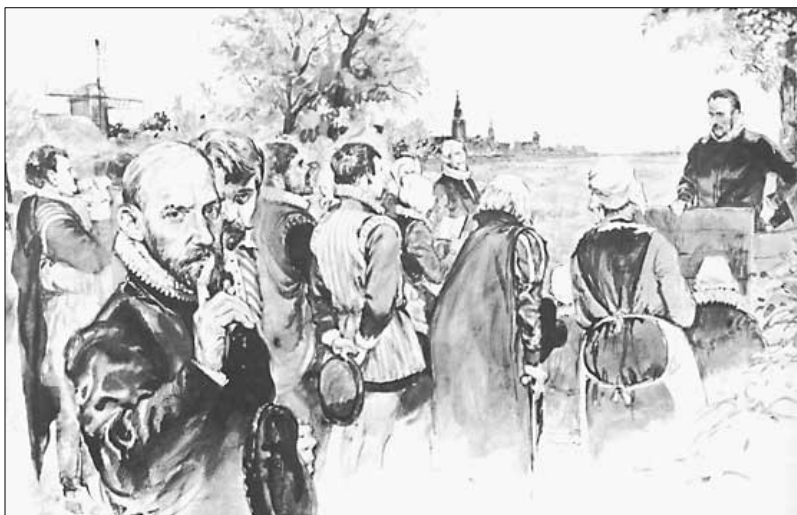
Peter has chosen as text Ephesians 2:8-10:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

We understand very well why Peter Gabriel chose this text to preach about. Clearly and vividly, he combats the Roman Catholic false doctrines. We can only be saved by *faith*. We can't earn anything by doing good works and don't need to either because Christ Jesus has done it all *for* us! He alone! He is the perfect Saviour. God's people *must* do good works. But they do not do them to earn something but out of gratitude because the Lord Jesus has redeemed



Open air church-service. <https://www.oudhoorn.nl/kerken/>



The first Open-air service in Overveen. Some thousand people walked for 2km into the dunes to listen to Peter Gabriel who used to be a monk.
<http://www.marceltettero.nl/>

them. The Roman Catholic Church teaches just the opposite!

Peter instructed the people in the truth of the Bible.

He preaches for *four* hours!

Everyone can follow him. The people listen carefully right till the end. No shuffling happens among the thousands of people because the sermon lasts so long. It remains breathlessly quiet, so quiet that they can hear the birds singing in the trees. Those people are not bored!

Do we listen so carefully and eagerly too?

In conclusion, the preacher offers a short prayer of thanks. He asks the Lord to give them all strength for the difficult times they are experiencing. He prays for the government and the king. No revolution! Then they all go home. Many must walk for hours, but they are not sorry that they made the long journey to Overveen. On the contrary! They have been comforted and encouraged by that glowing preaching.

Peter Gabriel, the preacher, also leaves. The next day he must preach somewhere else. Those field preachers do not get much rest; the dangers are great and many, but they put their lives in the hands of the Lord. Those people are no agitators and trouble-makers, yet the Roman Catholic Church persecutes them so bitterly! Why? Why?

Because Rome does not *want* to hear the truth, they want the people to believe their doctrine of lies. The light of the gospel may not be permitted to shine in their darkness. We see Satan raging.

We could tell you many more stories about field preaching. It happened in many other places. At times the psalm-singing could be heard for miles around. Even the monks in the monasteries could hear the solemn singing floating in from the fields. That often filled them with hatred and powerless rage. They were unable to stop it.

The soldiers, occasionally sent to *scatter* those assemblies, stood to listen with their guns pointing down instead.

Sometimes monks tried to disturb the peace. Once, a monk jumped into the water and loudly yelled for help during a field service. The many listeners let him scream, and finally, the monk crawled back onto dry ground and, wet through, went home embarrassed. His cunning plan to disturb the peace failed.

We could mention more instances.

That field preaching has been a blessing for many. One day God will reveal how much fruit those field preachings have borne.

THE ICONOCLASM - RESULT OF THE KING'S COMMAND

It is 18 August 1566.

It is hectic in the large, prosperous commercial city of Antwerp. Every year, on that date, the Roman Catholics held a large procession.

A procession is a church pageant. Heading that procession is someone solemnly carrying the image of the Virgin Mary. Various bands of music followed. Then came neatly dressed government officials, the guilds with their banners, the national guards, the monks from the various monasteries and finally, in long, long lines, the people!

At least, that is how it usually happened.

But this year, something was different. Oh, sure, there were plenty of people everywhere. They stood in long rows of three, four deep, along the streets but showed no respect. Every other year everyone was solemn and quiet while the procession went by. However, now there was yelling and shouting. Here and there, people laughed heartily.

"Mary, go home quick!" several called out, which caused boisterous laughter. They even threw stones at the image. No, they showed no reverence! The mood was very different from other years. The loaded atmosphere was full of a silent threat. So the procession did not follow its usual route but quickly returned to the 'Our Dear Lady Church'. That was the large cathedral in Antwerp. Then the officials placed the image of the Virgin Mary behind an iron railing at the front of the church instead of its usual place. The Roman Catholic clergy believed that it would be safer there.

Meanwhile, the church had filled with people who passionately hated image worship. They yelled abusive words at that image of Mary as if that dumb, stone image could help it. One pulled off his clog and threw it at that stone image. This produced loud laughter. Yet that day, nothing further happened.

The next day they did much the same. They began to mock and poke fun. One man ascended the pulpit and mockingly delivered a sermon. This offended another, who pulled the mocker from the pulpit by his legs, which resulted in a fierce brawl. They drew knives, and there was shouting and yelling. Yet nothing more happened that day either.

A day later, the church was full again. The people repeated the same scene. Several government officials, who had heard people were starting to riot in the church, moved quickly to try to calm the people down. They respectfully asked everyone to leave the building. The large main



Print of the destruction in the Church of Our Lady in Antwerp, the "signature event" of the Beeldenstorm, 20 August 1566.

Drawing by Frans Hogenberg.

doors were closed. Only a small side gate stayed open.

Many left the church through that gate. The officials also went. But the ringleaders remained, and other stirrers came in again through that same gate. They re-opened the main doors from the inside, and soon, the immense cathedral was full of people again.

But that day, it went further than shouting and yelling. Some had brought hammers and axes along. One climbed over the choir rail into the front of the church, and with his hammer, he smashed the image of the Virgin to pieces. The crowd reacted with loud cheers. Soon, the sounds of hammer and axe blows echoed through the church. Vandalism ran riot. Only a small group did the work, while most watched and laughed but did not try to stop it. It seemed as if some madness had seized those people.

They smashed all the many images there. They cut up beautiful, costly paintings. They threw stones through the priceless stained glass windows. They destroyed the altars. They ripped to shreds the robes worn by the priests during mass. They threw the 'host' on the ground and trampled on those consecrated and sanctified wafers while laughing loudly.

The people no longer respected that 'bread god'! Times really *had* changed!

When nothing was left to destroy in the beautiful cathedral of Antwerp, the crowd marched to other churches, singing and shouting. As they went, they plundered the monasteries they passed. They broke open vats of beer and wine and gulped down the contents to quench their thirst. That made them become a gang of drunks.

They went to other churches in Antwerp and also smashed everything in them.

This vandalism did not remain confined to Antwerp. Like a contagious disease, this '*Iconoclasm*' spread nationwide, first in the Southern Netherlands. But then it spread to the north. It seemed as if the people's patience had finally reached its limits.

They cleansed hundreds of churches of Roman Catholic idolatry. Some writers tell us they wrecked more than four hundred churches in Flanders alone. In this senseless Iconoclasm, they destroyed valuable goods worth enormous amounts of money. But nothing was stolen. It was not the idea to enrich themselves. It was an outburst of their hatred against Roman Catholic idolatry. Although they trampled on gold and silver, they took nothing. Whoever risked doing so received a sound thrashing and was thrown out of the building.

But what suddenly made this happen? Well, this did not happen suddenly at all! It had been brewing for a long time. The people had been so hopeful when, on 5 April, they had presented that petition. But it hadn't helped. The governess had promised moderation. But the people had justly said it was 'murderation' because Rome continued to kill numberless innocent people for their faith.



'Iconoclasm in a church', painted by Dirck van Delen in 1630.

They began holding field services because the people expected a favourable answer from the king.

But when the king answered, he dashed all their hopes to the ground. His answer was brutal, cruel, and severe. He commanded that the persecution was *not allowed* to stop. The king refused to even think about abolishing the feared and hated Inquisition.

What now?

Autumn was coming, so they could no longer have field preaching. That would be impossible while the rain poured down and the storms howled. The people were bitterly disappointed. They became jealous of the Roman Catholics, who had churches where they could gather peacefully. *They* had nothing!

And then ... then ... their anguish and despair turned into a fierce outburst. Their desperation turned into fury, and the result? The *Iconoclasm*.



Blue: The spread of the Iconoclasm in the Low Countries.

Yet, it was only a few who did the work. The others just watched. In the north, the destruction was not nearly as great as in the south. For instance, in Winsum, near Groningen, they carried the images out of the church. In Leeuwarden, they did not destroy but neatly stored them. Rome blamed the Calvinist preachers for the Iconoclasm, but that is *not* true! The blame for all this was the unyielding cruelty of Rome itself. That cruelty has brought the people to despair and finally to frenzy. Nearly all Calvinist preachers condemned the Iconoclasm. So did many nobles. In Utrecht and Holland, some nobles showed good leadership, which helped to restrain the people. Things should not have happened this way.

But how, then?

It was good to cleanse the church buildings from Roman Catholic idolatry. But it was not good that the *people* did this. The government should have done this because the task of the government is to protect God's Church. The government must eradicate all false religions. Naturally, that does not mean the government must destroy and kill all who believe differently, but those others may not publicly practice their false religion. Religious freedom is not correct. But there *must* be freedom of conscience.

God judges the conscience!

The government should have understood its calling and task. It did *not*, and so the people took over, though not to enrich themselves.

Rome also accused Calvinism of planning the Iconoclasm for some time already. That also is *not* true! It was a sudden outburst of rage and dissatisfaction because Rome did not change the sad state of affairs, despite everything they had tried. The Roman Catholic Church cannot pity itself too much because the misery *it* brought to *living people* is impossible for any pen to describe. The blood of tens of thousands of martyrs clings to that church! During the Iconoclasm, the long-provoked and embittered people cooled their rage on *dead* objects. Nobody slaughtered priests and monks during the Iconoclasm, which could also have happened. On the contrary, no one suffered

any harm. There is no reason for the Roman Catholic Church to have any self-pity.

Once again, it was good that the images were removed and the church buildings cleansed of Roman Catholic idolatry. But the way it happened was wrong. Almost all leading Calvinists disapproved.

We can tell much more, but this is enough. We have discussed the main things.

This outburst of rage was a grave warning to the king and his government not to continue the persecution. They disregarded that warning. And the consequences?
That's for the following chapters.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did the noblemen pay a visit to the governess?
2. Where did the term 'Beggars' originate? What did it mean?
3. What are the contents of the petition?
4. Explain why the nobles formed an alliance in 1566.
5. Why did certain Roman Catholic nobles also join this alliance?
6. Identify Henry of Brederode and Louis of Nassau.
7. What was the 'Alliance of the Church Councils'?
8. What was the answer of the governess?
9. How did affairs in The Netherlands progress during the moderation period?
10. What is field preaching? Explain how they did it.
11. How did the governess react to field preaching?
12. Identify the following:
 - a. Herman Modet
 - b. John Arentson
 - c. Peter Gabriel
13. How did the citizens try to protect themselves while attending field preaching?
14. Why were the city councils encountering difficulties in stopping field preaching?
15. What is meant by the term 'Iconoclasm'?
16. Explain why this rioting occurred.
17. How did most of the Calvinist preachers react to Iconoclasm?
18. How should we view Iconoclasm?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. State one text from God's Word showing that the methods used to destroy error were not according to the guidelines set for spreading the gospel.
2. We sometimes read of various godly kings of Judah who smashed images to powder, destroyed the high places and altars, etc. Must this also be condemned, or do you see a difference here? Explain your answer.