

# Confessions - their Binding and Interpretation (1)

On this website, some articles have already been published on the place and function of confessions in the church. The following two installments discuss the binding and interpretation of the confessions. These articles are taken over with permission from the magazine "Shield and Sword".<sup>(1)</sup>

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In Reformed churches, the confessions (the Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity) have an important function in the life of the church. In most Sunday afternoon services the Heidelberg Catechism is expounded upon. Office-bearers subscribe to the confessions of the church. Church-members that make public profession of faith are required to answer the question: "Do you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in the Christian church?". Yes, the confessions have rightly been called the *historic foundation* of the church!

## **The Confessions of the Church**

It has happened in church history, and it could happen today, that a church-member or office-bearer holds an objection to a specific statement in the confessions. This brother or sister could then come forward and prove from Scripture - in the church orderly way, by a so-called *gravamen* - that the confession errs.[1]

This ecclesiastical way of a gravamen against the confessions has not often been

followed in the past, and today is not often followed either. Perhaps this implies that all church-members wholeheartedly agree with the confessions in their entirety? I cannot help but get the feeling that this is not the case with all church-members in all reformed churches. Yet these church-members do not submit a gravamen against the confessions. Most often, they seek other ways to escape from the binding character of the confessions.

For instance, in the 1960's a minister of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, Rev. B. Telder, taught the doctrine of soul sleep after death, while the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 22 teaches that the soul after this life shall "...immediately be taken up to Christ, my Head". This minister did not follow the ecclesiastical way, but simply said: "Well, the Heidelberg Catechism does indeed say this, but in doing so it merely employed the language and common thought of the time in which it was written. We are not bound to the terminology of the confession!"[2].

Also in Reformed churches of today there may be all sorts of evasions to the binding character of the confessions. It may be helpful to take a short look at some aspects of the binding and interpretation of the confessions.

## **Words and Substance**

Some Reformed Christians argue, such as the mentioned Rev. Telder did, that we are not bound to the words of the confessions. Yet we are bound to the confessions as they are worded. The confessions were not worded in an indifferent manner, but the words were specifically chosen, often to exclude errors and heresies. A well-known example from centuries ago is the Greek word *homoousios* ('of one substance') in the Nicene Creed, which some wanted to read as *homoiousos* ('like in substance'). This is not a difference of just one letter, but it is a difference between spiritual life or death; the Son of God is not just *like* the Father, but He and the Father *are* one (John 10:30).

Yet the binding to the confession is to its substance (i.e. everything confessed in a Lord's Day or article as worded), but not to its words, order of presentation and Scriptural proof texts. For example, in older versions of the Belgic Confession art. 4, the letter to the Hebrews was referred to as a letter of Paul. Although newer versions have changed this, and I believe this is more accurate, nobody would have gone against the confession by arguing that Paul is not the author of Hebrews. The confession here intended to confess the canonicity of this letter, and did not intend to attribute this letter to Paul.[3]

It is, therefore, not possible to submit a gravamen against the words of the confession. In the confessions, the churches *collectively* testify of the truth. An individual brother (or sister) might prefer to testify of the truth with expressions different from those found in the confessions; however, then he should ask himself the question: can I join a church that testifies the truth as expressed in her confessions? It would be a binding to words if an individual believer wanted his own preferred words be taken up in the confession.[4]

### **Major and Minor Points**

Other Christians may argue that there is a difference between *major* and *minor* points in the confession; or between *fundamental* and *non-fundamental* points; or between *essential* and *non-essential* points. In the confessions, however, the churches testify of the common faith; and can they still function as such if members individually decide to agree with a certain part of the confessions or not? Will we not end up with office-bearers promoting errors and heresies which they call 'non-essential'?

As an aside, we note that some churches have attempted to implement 'safeguards' against the latter situation. For instance, many Presbyterian churches have a so-called 'system subscription'. [5] Office-bearers then subscribe to the doctrinal 'system' as contained in the Westminster Standards, and exceptions (or so-called 'scruples') can be brought before the presbytery. The presbytery will then rule whether this exception is acceptable or not. We fail to

see, however, why other office-bearers or church-members should still be bound to this contested part of the confession -isn't that an individualistic approach?

In Reformed churches, the non-fundamental points are outside the confession. The so-called 'freedom of prophecy' does not apply to the confessions, but to non-confessional teachings; and even concerning the latter teachings its prophetic character (i.e. that it speaks the Word of God) should be discerned, before we can talk about 'freedom of prophecy'!

Minor points in the confessions... a good example here may be a circle, which has a center and a perimeter.[6] If some truth is not seen as belonging to the center but as 'peripheral', it can only be called as such because it is related to the center; and even the area close to the perimeter still belongs to the circle if it is inside. And likewise, the center is only a midpoint because it is related to a perimeter. There may be 'central' and 'peripheral' truths, but they are closely related -our confessions are a unity!

In the next article, some attention will be given to the interpretation of the confessions.

(I) M.R. Vermeer, 'Confessions - their Binding and Interpretation (1)', *Shield & Sword*, vol. 2, no. 4, April 2017: pp. 5-7.

[1] In 1905, the General Synod Utrecht of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands took out a part of the Belgic Confession, article 36 (concerning the task of civil government). As far as I know, this has been the only occasion after the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) that the Reformed Churches have accepted such a gravamen.

[2] This minister argued that a gravamen would only be profitable if the churches collectively had come to another insight, by further study of God's Word, and that we should start with an openness for discussion about these things [B. Telder, "*Sterven... en dan?*" (Kampen: J.H. Kok N.V., 1960): p. 163 f.]. This approach later became typical for the so-called '*buiten-verband*' (outside the federation) churches which came into existence in 1967 (and nowadays call themselves the *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken*).

[3] The proof texts do not belong to the confessed substance because this would constrain the 'exegetical freedom' in the churches.

[4] The words receive their meaning in connection to the *substance* that is confessed. This is even true of a specific word like *homoousios*. In the time when the original Nicene Creed of 325 A.D. was written (the creed on which our Niceaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 A.D. is based) the term *homoousios* was open to a wide variety of interpretations, and before this Council even sounded gnostic. Due to the efforts of Athanasius and other defenders of the Christian doctrine, it became a litmus test for orthodoxy, as explained by Robert Letham, "*The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*" (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing Company, 2004): p. 120f.]

[5] We are not arguing here that all Presbyterian churches have this practice, as some Presbyterian churches may have a full subscription viewpoint. In American Presbyterianism, the 'system subscription' view has its historic roots in the Adopting Act of 1729, which states that the Westminster Standards are "in all the essential and necessary articles" good doctrine; see for further information the article by K.A. Kok, "*Presbyterian or Reformed?*", available on <http://spindleworks.com/library/kok/presorref.htm>.

[6] This example originates from K. Schilder, and has been taken over by the late Rev. J. Francke in his still relevant discussion on confessions [in "*De kerk en het sociale vraagstuk*" (Haarlem: Uitgave van de vereniging "Mannenbond op Gereformeerden Grondslag", 1949), pp. 169-170].