

# Confessions - their Binding and Interpretation (2, final)

This second and final article on “Confessions - their Binding and Interpretation” discusses the interpretation of the confessions.

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In the previous article, it was discussed that members of Reformed churches are bound to “all the articles and points of doctrine” of the confessions. Some people, however, may argue that the confessions are old documents that need interpretation. For instance, when the Belgic Confession in article 29 speaks about the false church, can we apply this to a church other than that originally meant, namely the Roman Catholic Church?

## **Original Intent**

One method to interpret the confessions would be an historic interpretation, in which the original intent is decisive in determining what the confession says. This historic interpretation could be as per the intent of the author, or as per the dogmas prevalent when the confessions were written, or as per the intent of the ecclesiastical assembly that adopted these confessions (e.g. the Synod of Dort 1618-19). Did the original author of the Belgic Confession in article 29 mean the Roman Catholic Church? If so, that would be the valid meaning that is applicable today.

Of course, it may be helpful to sort out what precisely the original author of a confession or his contemporary theologians taught. The confessions were not

written in a vacuum, but in a certain time and age. Yet this is not the right way to arrive at certainty concerning the meaning of a confession –as if its meaning can only be ascertained after painstaking research! As we will see later in this article, this method of interpretation is at odds with the true character of the confession.

In the 1940's in the Netherlands, many 'synodicals' advocated this historic interpretation. They even went a step further and wanted to bind the churches to 'common ideas' of theologians of the past, for instance about the 'covenant with the elect'. Nowadays in the Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt (Reformed Churches liberated) the historic interpretation has again gained ground, although no longer to impose certain theological concepts, but to promote postmodern 'freedom'. As one concerned minister has put it: "The confession then really becomes the confession of the fathers with *their* theology. You still listen to it with respect, just as to your grandfather. But in the end, you can decide yourselves which of it you still want to believe and teach".[1]

### **Today's Intent**

The confessions can also be interpreted as per the intent of today's church which imposes the confessions on her office-bearers. This view is sometimes denoted by the Latin term *animus imponentis* (*animus* indicating 'intention' and *imponentis* indicating the 'imposing body'). Here the church is seen as a legal party that requires subscription, and therefore that meaning which she intended to impose is decisive.

A study committee of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) employed this approach in a 2004 report to the General Assembly on "Views of Creation". This report argued that "this communal understanding of the church's constitution involves the sense in which it was adopted by the church in the second General Assembly in 1936, as well as subsequent developments in its corporate understanding...".[2]

In comparison to the historic interpretation this approach shifts focus some centuries forward, but still in the wrong direction. What if the 'communal understanding' is based on an error, or even promotes heresy, misquoting the confession? Should a prospective office-bearer then come forward and state his 'scruple'? No, this office-bearer should work towards reformation of the church, unapologetically using the confessions.

Underlying this view seems to be that the church is seen as a "community of interpretation" (as the mentioned OPC report puts it). It is doubtful whether a church can be called a 'community of interpretation'. Although church-members, among which theologians and pastors in particular, may 'interpret' Scripture and confessions, yet the church is the community of saints which needs to listen to the Word of God.

## **Confession and Scripture**

Listening to the Word of God, saying 'amen' to it -that is the true character of a Scriptural confession. In Romans 10:8, the apostle Paul cites words from the Old Testament (Deut. 30:14): "'The word is near you, in your mouth, and in your heart' (that is the word of faith which we preach) ...".

The Word is *near you*... the Lord our God has given us His Word in our mouths and our hearts, and therefore we are called to confess it. The Word of God is so close that we cannot but confess it!

This Word is *of faith*... full of promise and grace, a Word that is intended to be faithfully accepted and confessed.

The Word is *preached*... it comes through a human instrument which is used for the proclamation of God's Word. In a true confession, the Word of God is served,

and those listening to the served Word of God time and again turn themselves towards the Word. The confession explains the Word of God, and the Word of God explains the confession.[3]

Let us examine ourselves, and let us test the spirits in the churches... Do we confess God's Word in our lives? Is there confessional integrity in the churches? The Word of God is near you...

(I) M.R. Vermeer, 'Confessions - their Binding and Interpretation (2)', *Shield & Sword*, vol. 2, no. 5, May 2017: pp. 2-3.

[1] H.W. Van Egmond et al., "*Belijdende kerk blijven*" (Zwaag: Van Berkum Graphics BV, 2008): p. 43.

[2] This report can be found on the OPC website, url: <https://www.opc.org/GA/creation.html>.

[3] This is taken from J.R. Wiskerke, "*De strijd om de sleutel der kennis. Een bundel opstellen over theologie en filosofie.*" (Groningen: De Vuurbaak bv, 1978): p. 50.