

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

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

---

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.

---

# 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>

---

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].