

Our Binding to the Confession

The members of reformed churches are bound to the confession of the church. A well-known theologian (systematic theologian or dogmatician) who fully bound himself to the reformed confession was prof. K. Schilder (1890-1952). A characterization of his dogmatic work has been provided shortly after his death, by Rev. J. Kamphuis, titled "*Critische Sympathie (over den dogmatischen arbeid van dr. K. Schilder)*" ['Critical Sympathy (about the dogmatic work of dr. K. Schilder)'].^[1]

In this article, Rev. Kamphuis points to the fact that Schilder's dogmatic work was critical- the truth of the revelation of Scripture is never exhausted! However, his dogmatic work was also sympathetic- based on a voluntary binding to the confession. A part of this article by J. Kamphuis, concerning the 'sympathetic' character of Schilder's work, is translated below. This is of importance with respect to our own binding to the confession, which is "... a voluntary binding to the content of the confession because there is and there must be a binding to the content of the Word of God".

Voluntary binding

We will, however, purposely still busy ourselves with the "sympathetic signature" in the dogmatic labor of Prof. Schilder. First, we will explain in Schilder's own words the expression: sympathetic. After he (Schilder, transl.) posted the importance and necessity of the critical function of dogmatics he continues:

"naturally, this critical posture can only be sympathetic, in other words also in his scholarly thinking the dogmatician must proceed as believer from the dogmas of the church".

So here is the *voluntary, preliminary* binding to the confession of the church, a

binding which evidently not only applies to the *dogmatician*, or *theologian*, but for every scholar. But this binding naturally puts the dogmatician in a peculiar position because the *object* of his critical scientific research is at the same time his voluntarily accepted, by faith, confession of the church. It catches our eye how great a contrast the above is with the binding that Hepp has placed on the dogmatician. (The theologian V. Hepp (1879-1950) tended to be a confessionalist; confessionalism is a *caricature* of confessional faithfulness. He stated that the reproduction of, and reflection on, Scripture revelation must always happen in harmony with and within the confines of church dogma. Transl.). Hepp had hollowed out the criticizing role. His binding is that of a servant, but *this* (as above) voluntary preliminary binding is that of a child of the church. Therefore, Schilder has also indignantly rejected with ever so many words that this preliminary binding would be “slavish” and rob the dogmatician of the honor of his scholarship. In the debate for the promotion rights of the Kampen University (enabling students to receive a PhD, transl.) he wrote these beautiful words:

“I don’t know how in the world the CHURCH for ITS part, FOR ITS PART I say, can present OBJECTIONS against the voluntary confessional binding of free, professing members, who desire to become professors; an objection, nota bene, with respect to the freedom of scholarship... doesn’t the church for its part believe, call out and testify before God, and angels, and people, that what it has and confesses, is key to knowledge and scholarship, is the liberation of thought, is the source and guarantor of the freedom of human thinking? Certainly, the church can profess wrongly, be sluggish and tardy in confessing the truth. But doesn’t it acknowledge then that its confession of the truth is not unchangeable, that scholarship can bring whatever it has discovered to its attention, that it is even invited to do so? And would not the church, when it finds that the results of investigation appear to be contrary to its confession but to agree with the revealed Word and its contents, correct its confession? ... The truth has been given a slap in the face if the church asserts that it, also when it wrestles in obedience with the truth, remains a prison for scholarship. That would be liberal haughtiness in a reformed church....” “I can never give a strong enough warning that the church should never give in, ON ITS PART, for scholarship to lose its freedom within it. The deepest principles are affected here, and with full conviction I freely declare....;

There can be no suggestion that a Calvinist church would acknowledge the

complete enslavement of scholarship that is voluntarily bound to her expressed faith. *This would be a renunciation of the faith of the fathers and a return to the position of the liberals so fortunately resisted by Dr. Kuyper.*

Indeed- here the “fundamental principles” are affected! A stance is taken in a battle which after 1930 (the year these words were published) increasingly began to appear not only of *academic* or *theoretical* importance, because it is about the place of the church as carrier and preacher of the Word and of its confession; and about the relationship of the church, and the word spoken by the church, toward the kingdom of God; and the work performed by the children of the church as citizens of that kingdom. Today it will also be good still to pay astute attention to this voice which INVOKED the children of the church not to abuse their freedom in Christ by servile bondage.

Binding to the content of the confession

When Schilder speaks of binding to the confession and therefore speaks of a “*sympathetically critical reproduction*” of the contents of church dogma being the task of dogmatics, then he means a *real* binding to the CONTENT of the confession and by that he (who also wanted to have a sympathetic stance regarding the confession of the church in his scholarly work) has clearly separated himself from, and held as antithetical, the modern mainly *dialectic* talk of ‘*pathos*’, which (according to Barthian theologians, transl.) would also be the dogmatician’s directives and by which alone their work would be justified. “Sympathetic” and “pathos”; here the same words are used but how different their subject matter is!

“The question....has been asked, whether it is indeed possible that we can confess a content of faith. Karl Barth and his followers deny that people can confess their faith in the sense of putting it on paper. Because according to them faith is an act without any thought content, it is only a conviction that God speaks. And just as God’s Word does not receive a permanent form, but passes over you like a storm, so it also is with faith, you experience the speaking of God in a moment of pathos and rapture, and therefore it cannot be

in the form of a confession which can be written on paper.

Yet they claim to have respect for the confession. But in this sense: not for its content, but for the “formation” of it. Because in the pathos by which the authors struggled in the confession something returns of the pathos of the writers of the Bible, something similar to the confessions of the martyrs and the old Apostles and prophets. They have respect for the QUALE (HOW the confession was written) but not for the QUANTUM (WHAT is written).

The term pathos is important.... It is good to fight against literalism, to make a wager that in this way perhaps something beautiful may be found (pathos) is wrong. Especially if by this we want to act against “a faith to the letter”, and to show that there is no pathos in the church today. They no longer want to know of a faith which believes that God gave subject matter in His Word and allows it to be professed in the confession. We have content in the Word and also in the confession.”

Therefore, there is and there can be a *voluntary* binding to the CONTENT of the confession because there is and there *must* be a binding to the CONTENT of the Word of God. The binding to the *Scriptures* is unconditional and therefore the dogmatician must always be critical about his own subject, but at the same time there is a serious binding to the *content* of the confession. Therefore, the criticism may only be *sympathetic*.

Binding according to the “measure” of faith

In this context the comments Schilder made about the so-called *analogia fidei* are very instructive. This is a notion borrowed from Romans 12:6-7: “in proportion to our faith”, the (Dutch, transl.) Statenvertaling has “measure of faith” (“Having then gifts differing *according to the grace* that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in *proportion to our faith*” (NKJV, transl.). The new translation of the Dutch Bible Society has translated it “according to our faith”,

regrettably a translation - see below - which insinuates and supports a subjective interpretation). A debate occurred between Dr. Hepp, Dr. Ubbink, and Prof. Lindeboom about this term and its application. A debate summarized and discussed by Greijdanus in his commentary on Romans. Schilder refers to this debate and its review by Greijdanus in his lecture notes. He first describes how according to Hepp the analogy in Romans 12:6 could mean in the first place *measure or relationship*, and in the second place rule or agreement. Hepp chooses the first meaning.

“In this light verse 6 would mean that every prophet must look to see whether he exceeds the limits of his prophetic powers. Thus purely subjective, whether or not he could bring the steam of his prophetic kettle to whistle.”

Therefore Schilder mentions the interpretation of Greijdanus who partly aligns himself with Prof. Lindeboom and resists Hepp. Hepp takes “faith” in a *subjective* sense and analogy in the sense of measure of agreement. But Greijdanus takes “faith” in the objective sense:

“It is expressly demanded here that whatever the prophets say must be assessed by others. But what must they assess? Whether he speaks through an inner conviction from subjective faith or from false excitement or something similar (as Hepp claimed, J.K.)? Of course, they had to assess this: did he speak by the Holy Spirit, or by himself? But how can they and must they assess that? How else but by whether the contents of what was said agreed with what God had spoken beforehand. In Romans 12 verse 6 the “faith” does not refer to self-motivation, an inner process, but to an objective content which can serve as criterion... We get a good impression of the meaning of the Greek word for *analogia* (“measure”) from the letters of Gregorius of Nyssa when he deals with the construction of a house of prayer... when he writes about the requirement of the height being a ratio of or in *proportion* to the width. So the width is the “measure” of what the height should be and with which it should be in agreement. Thus it is said in Romans 12:6 that faith in the objective sense must serve as measure for assessing prophecy, to know if it can be accepted as from God’s Spirit, or rejected as not from Him. Prophecy must produce a result that is in complete harmony with that faith”.

Schilder ties himself to this exegesis:

“Therefore, if a man is a prophet, he must hold himself to that which is counted as prophecy in the church. Then one should hold himself to that which was chronicled by the apostles and prophets. Keep prophesying and do not bring forward any personal whims.”

Conclusion

Child of God - the God of the Scriptures;

Child of the church - the church of Dordrecht, Geneva, Heidelberg;

“Critically-sympathetic”.

Within the combination of these - a combination not made by a construct, but given and always continuously given by that Lord who only can and only wants to be addressed as Father by those who learned, by His power, to know the church as mother- occurs the wonderful tension of this dogmatician (i.e. K. Schilder, transl.). Life was lived completely in that fear (of the Lord, transl.), trembling before the majesty of the speaking God, and living in the communion of the answering, confessing church of Christ Jesus. Was he (i.e. K. Schilder, transl.) not beloved to us in that fear? And; he KNEW that the answer of the church was shaped by God’s speaking from eternity according to His good pleasure. Therefore the fear of this dogmatician was quickened from within the circle of the peace of faith. From *that* faith which trusts in the “God of Dordrecht”, as he once called the Lord, the God of penetrating grace, according to His counsel, which

“has from the beginning of the world to the present time been powerfully fulfilled, though the gates of hell vainly try to frustrate it. In due time the elect will be gathered together into one, and there will always be a church of believers, founded on the blood of Christ. This church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve him as her Saviour (who as bridegroom for his bride laid down his life for her on the cross) and celebrate his praises here and through all eternity.” (Canons of Dort, II, art. 9)

[1]For the Dutch version, including references, see the article “Onze binding aan de belijdenis” under “Artikelen” on this website.