

The Church and the Confession

The confessions are of great importance for the true Church; together in unity we express our faith with Jesus Christ our Head. While digging through some old documents we came across this following article, which so clearly explains the importance and place of the confessions. While the name of the author is not known with certainty, this article is likely written around 1990 by the late Rev. M. VanderWel (1926-2005), minister in the Canadian Reformed Churches.

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The “Church and the Confession” is the title of an article that appeared in the June 1989 issue of *Diakonia*. It was taken from an out-of-print book called “The Historic Foundation” (*Het Historisch Fundament* by J. Munneke). This article is unique in that it is presented in a format that constitutes an excellent framework for a thorough presentation and discussion on the church and the confessions. It provides a valuable overview of confessional matters. Therefore I would like to follow the format of this article, and in the process use, (appropriate or purloin if you like) some of that material for presentation and discussion this evening.

Introduction

But first a question, Why the topic “The Church and the Confession?”. Has the matter of the confession of the Church not received more than enough coverage? Many of our ecclesiastical assemblies have at one time or another dealt with matters that involve the confession of the Church. We could think here of our relationships and contacts with other churches and the subsequent discussions about divergencies between the confessions and the need for confessional membership. What also comes to mind is the formation of the confessional conference for Reformed unity “to consider the formulation of biblically based statements of faith.” The Church press certainly has contributed its share of

material to the discussions surrounding the confession of the Church. Much has been written about the history, significance and authority of the confession. And it is likely that a lot more will be said and read, and also written and published about all of these matters.

So why do we envision a need to discuss the confession again and again? Does this not border on confessionalism? Can we not change the subject for a change? Well, I suppose we could. There are indeed many other alternatives; an unlimited variety of subjects and topics could be discussed. Election and reprobation, the assurance of faith, the sacraments, the law of God, the authority of Holy Scriptures, God's providence, Christ's atonement, the work of the Holy Spirit, our deliverance, regeneration, good works, the Trinity etc etc. These matters, and many more are dealt with in the confession of the Church, and therefore what the Church holds for truth according to the word of God must invariably form the basis of our considerations and discussions on these matters.

If that is no longer the case, when that no longer happens, we forfeit our claim to being Reformed, and ultimately we cease to be the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Think for example of the developments in the Christian Reformed Churches, when catechism preaching went by the wayside, and the normative character of the confessions was challenged, it was only a matter of time before the authority and the infallibility of the Word of God itself was also questioned. The Christian Reformed Churches in spite of their beautiful name are now no longer "Christian", definitely not Reformed, and it is doubtful whether the Word "church" is still a fitting description of what is left of this denomination.

And what about the Canadian Reformed Churches? Have we as Church members perhaps learned something from these developments and also from the events leading to the liberation of 1944?

It cannot be denied that also in our Reformed circles there are at present all kinds

of phenomena which point to decline and regression. Indifference to the Church, increased liberalism and conformity to the world, increased ignorance of what the Reformed confessions say, and an uncertainty with regard to the “unchangeable truths”.

People can no longer say positively and surely what is true, and do not dare to speak in specifics. They are afraid of dogmatic formulations. To be questioning and seeking is regarded as a greater indication of earnestness than to be precise about one’s confession. People lean toward the things we have in common with others instead of having an eye for what specifically characterizes one’s own standpoints. There are many who do not want to hear anything about our confessions having a normative character and being a binding consensus.

Also today we can hear such statements and slogans as “not doctrine, but life”, “no creed but Christ”, “doctrine divides, service unites”, “not form but spirit, not confession but experience.” These statements are often made by the very people who truly want “reformation” in the Church. Yet they fail to ask the question “What is reformation? What does it mean to be Reformed?”

The answer to this question, Schilder once declared “is ultimately so plain and ordinary that it almost amazes us.” Reformation is - return to the confessions. “We want to begin with the belief that our thinking is ordered by the reading and acceptance of Scripture - as opposed to being ordered by a theologian or by anyone else” (or for that matter by ourselves.) The basis for what we confess is not first and foremost our subjective views and experiences, but the truth of the Word as summarized in our confessions. Reformation then is return to the confessions. With that thought in mind let us return to the article of J. Munneke and see what we can learn about “The Church and the Confession.”

1) The Foundation of the Church

“The foundation of the Church is Jesus Christ. He bought her with His blood and

she has no other foundation.” We believe in the Christ, who has revealed Himself in His Word. He is the Christ of the scriptures. If we say that Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Church, we may also say that the Bible is the foundation of the Church. On the word of the apostles and prophets Christ builds His Church.

2) The Bulwark of the Truth

The Church is not only built on the Word, she also has to proclaim that Word; she must carry it out into the world. The Church is the “pillar and bulwark” of the truth. Nearly every time Paul uses the word “truth” he means God’s Word. Christ also uses that word in the same sense “Thy word is truth.” The truth is diametrically opposed to the lie. If anyone wants to know the truth, he has to go to the Church. The Church has received the Word of God, and she must be a “pillar and a bulwark” of the truth.

3) The Word must be Confessed

To be and to remain a pillar and bulwark the Church must keep (or guard) the word of God. We must protect it against falsification by the lie. The Church has to keep the Word pure by guarding it against heresy, by confessing the Word of truth, and the truth of the Word. To confess then means to say the same thing as the Word. It is a repetition of the Word. Not a repetition in the same sense of parroting or reciting. If you parrot or recite someone’s words, it is not necessary to agree with them. This is totally impossible when you confess.

Confessing and believing are inseparably bound. Paul says, “With the heart man believes and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.” (Rom 10:10) Believing with the heart and confessing with the lips cannot be separated. For this reason the Belgic Confession begins with the words, “We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth...”. I cannot believe without confessing: I cannot confess without believing. If I believe, I must confess and if I confess, I must believe. One confesses to salvation and, therefore, it is a necessity.

Confession is made with the mouth but it comes from the heart. It is a matter of the lips but no less so of the heart. What I confess, that I champion. If I sincerely confess that Jesus is my Saviour, I know with all my heart that He saved me.

When Paul in Gal. 1:9 speaks about the preaching of the gospel, it is already a confession of the heart. What else is preaching but a repetition of the Word? Confession has been rightly called the “amen” of the Church, the amen to the Word.

4) The Confession is the Property of the Church

In a confession the Church pronounces what she holds for truth according to the Word of God.

Confession is a personal matter. Do we not believe with the heart and confess with the lips? At the same time it is a communal matter! The Church is built on the confession! If God’s Word is given to the Church, then the keeping (guarding) of the Confession of the Word is a matter of the Church as a community. Rightly so, it has been said, “The congregation of believers (the Church) has, in a common belief, confessed God’s truth.” She has sought and accepted a common formulation of that truth.

5) The Confession in History

In the early Church there was already a more or less fixed confession formula. Timothy “made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim. 6:12). It has been suggested that Paul here refers to a confession made by Timothy at his baptism.

In persecutions (1 Tim. 3:13) and in the fight against heresies and heathendom, the congregation was forced to formulate briefly her belief in the scriptures.

Throughout the history of the Church it was necessary for the Church to preserve the purity of faith and to prevent the spread of heresies.

We cannot give here an overview of the confession in history. It should, however, be clear that the Church today would not have been a pillar or a bulwark, if the Word had not been kept in the past.

6) The Significance of the Confession

The confession fulfils an important function in the preservation of the Church.

According to Prof. P. Biesterveld, the confession is necessary:

- a) To give a true and authentic survey of the confessed doctrine of the Church, so that all slander of the opposition can be denied;
- b) To witness publicly against the world and to the honour of God;
- c) To preserve unity among the Churches of the same confession;
- d) To preserve the purity of faith and to prevent the spread of heresies;
- e) To pass on the true religion to the next generation, so that they can propagate and develop it;
- f) To show what in history has been held as the truth.

A few remarks about the unity and necessity of the confession.

Without the confession there cannot be a unity of faith. If I would say, "I appeal to the Scriptures," I know beforehand that many others can do the same thing, but with a totally different result. "Every heretic has his text." Everyone can find texts

in the Bible, which seem to defend his particular position.

One has to read each Bible text in context and to compare Scripture with Scripture, if one wants to understand God's Word.

God's Word is a unity and that unity cannot be broken. (Jn. 10:35). We must never lose sight of that unity. The confession honours that unity. It does not quote a particular text out of context but does justice to the totality of scriptures. The confession arranges the many texts on the same subjects and so comes with the message of the Scriptures concerning that subject.

So the Church places the message of the one, indivisible Word of God over against the false doctrine, so that the truth does not go down in a world of lies.

7) The Confession Work of Men Only?

It is often said "The confession is only the work of men and as such infinitely inferior to the inspired Word." In this way a wedge is driven between the Divine Word and the repeated word of the confession.

That the confession is the work of men and the Bible the Divinely inspired Word goes without saying.

The confession itself, however, does not want anything to do with that faulty antitheses. It does not place itself above but precisely under the Scriptures, as it is expressed in B.C. art. 7 "...it is unlawful for anyone, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy scriptures... Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures."

Yet Jacobus Trigland, who fought against Arminianism, denied the charge that the confession is only a human document. In his “Ecclesiastical History” (1650) he wrote:

“One must not consider the Belgic Confession as simply a human document but as the writing of Godfearing and faithful teachers of the true Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is taken from the Word of God to serve as a sound and scriptural confession of faith; it was confessed by the faithful martyrs... it was recognized by the Reformed churches of the Netherlands and France as being sound and in conformity with God’s Word and as such was used against the papists and all kinds of sects; it was defended boldly and intellectually against all dissidents; and by it the Reformed churches were separated from all kinds of sects. That is more than simply the writings of men.”

In conformity with God’s Word! A beautiful expression! The confession has already been called: “the repeated Word”, “a repetition of the Holy Scriptures”, and “the amen of the Church to the word.”

8) The Historic Foundation of the Church

“After the foregoing it is no longer difficult to call the confessions the historic foundation of the Church. The scriptural foundation, as we have seen, is the word of the apostles and prophets. If, however, the Church maintains that scriptural element in the confession (the repeated Word), then we may also call the confession the repeated Word and the historic foundation of the Church.

The confession “takes its authority from Scripture.” It does not want to be anything but an interpretation of Scripture, in conformity with the Word of God... For that reason the expression ‘on the basis of the confession’ means to a Calvinist nothing else than on the basis of the Word.”

The confession is often divided as follows:

I General or ecumenical creeds:

- Apostles' Creed;
- Nicene Creed;
- Athanasian Creed.

II Particular or reformed creeds:

- Belgic Confession (B.C.);
- Heidelberg Catechism (H.C.);
- Canons of Dort (C.D.).

“The terms ‘ecumenical’ and ‘reformed’ confession are not opposites but they indicate the historic origins of the creeds. The ecumenical creeds were formulated and accepted by the ecumenical councils of the early Church, while the reformed creeds came into being during the Reformation era. The latter, however, are nothing more than expansions and elaboration of the former. The term ‘general’ and ‘particular’ creeds are, strictly speaking, incorrect. The detailed creeds are not special creeds as opposed to the general confession of the Apostles’ Creed. The detailed creeds, in their elaboration of the truth, remain faithful to the Apostles’ Creed.”

These remarks are very important to the unity and continuity of the confession. If GOD’S Word is the eternal Word (see a.o. Is. 40:9) then the repeated word also shall not age. That does not mean that an expansion of the confession will never be necessary.

9) Church Confederation and Confession

Church federation and confession are closely related. Unity of confession is the essential basis for church federation: church federation can only be entered into

when the unity of confession is present. Then, however, church federation must be entered into.

“For the doctrine isn’t the property of a particular church but belongs to the churches in general. The Word did not come to one church only but to all churches. The churches then are committed to one another not because of an agreement but because God says so and points the one out to the other.”

Rules, mutual agreement (a Church Order) are needed for a church confederation. The Church Order has been called the agreement of the ecclesiastical society.

We are well aware of the fact that the character of the Church Order is totally different from that of the confession.

- God has charged us to form a church confederation;
- that the unity of the confession is the basis for church confederation;
- that the church confederation, as laid down in the Church Order, guards the unadulterated maintenance of the confession (art. 53,54);
- that the church government, the ecclesiastical law, as laid down in the Church Order, is dictated by God’s Word. We do not, however, disguise the fact that some points of order, included in the Church Order, are not directly taken from Scriptures or confession.

For those reasons we are of the opinion that the Church Order belongs to the historic foundation of the Church.

10) The Authority of the Confessions

As we have seen the Church is quite clear about the authority of the confession. For this reason the office bearers of the Church have to subscribe to the three

Forms of Unity and if they refuse to do so, they are by that fact suspended and ultimately they will be dismissed.

This is not confessionalism, not an over estimation of the confession. Calvinists never put the confession on a par with the inspired Word of God. The Form of Subscription leaves the possibilities open for those who have “any difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrine or any point to bring them before an ecclesiastical assembly.”

“In the confession... we read God’s truth, which we read in His Word. That truth the Church has absorbed, reflected, processed, and in her own words expressed against heresies.” In her own words She repeats Scripture. She, therefore, has derivative authority only.

Precisely therein lies the confession’s greatest strength. “It witnesses; So says the scriptures; it is written!’

When the Church no longer says “thus says the Lord”, and no longer binds office-bearers and Church members to what it has confessed, then the Church is finished as a pillar and a certainty of the truth. For that reason the Church must maintain the authority of the confession for the sake of her life.

11) The Interpretation of the Confession

In all possible ways people have been trying to get out from under the authority of the confession. One of these ways has been the interpretation, the exegesis of the confession.

Nowadays, it is generally argued that the confessions have had their time. They

are historic documents and as such bound to time. Today, we formulate many things differently and there are many doctrines about which people think differently today.

The authors were well intentioned, and the confession has its merits, but it is out of step with modern theology. Today the basic formula: "Jesus is Lord..." is sufficient.

The confessions, however, are not historical documents only. "The confessions must be read and explained in the light of the authors intentions, not in accordance with the theology of those days, but in accordance with, and in the sense of scriptures."

If one no longer reads the confessions in the Scriptural sense, but interprets it as one pleases, it becomes extremely dangerous. Then one reads too easily one's own thoughts into the confession. The confession is then explained in such a way that it conforms to one's own opinions. So the synodical Churches divided the B.C. Art. 27-29, into two parts. Art. 27 deals with the invisible church and Art. 29 with the visible church. In doing so the correct view of the Church was lost.

As result it went from bad to worse. The synodical churches still have the confessions, but in practice they are no longer bound to it. History has shown that through historical or scientific interpretation of the confession, God's people have been robbed of the teachings of Scriptures. Therefore, there is no other interpretation of the confessions, than that of the Word of God.

12) The Catholicity of the Confession

We believe and profess a holy, catholic (=universal) Christian Church, which has been from the beginning of the world and will be to the end thereof; She is spread

out over the length and breadth of the earth as well as over the length of her history.

As the Church is catholic, so is her confession. The confession speaks to everyone through all the ages. The Church has the message of Scriptures for all the ages.

The catholicity of the confession, however, doesn't only apply to the continuity in history, but also to life in all its aspects. It is not restricted to the ecclesiastical life. Each Church member has promised in his public profession to submit himself to the admonition and discipline of the Church or they become delinquent. The Church exercises her official authority over all members on all their conduct. The Church does not deal with the "spheres of life", political, social, and school societies, but she deals with the members of such societies as Church members.

No matter in what area the Church members are busy, they are always bound to the confession. There is no "sphere of life", in which the confession is not active. When Church members form a society, no matter what kind, they are always bound to the confession. For that reason the foundation of a political or school society or whatever society of Church members there may be, can be no other than the confession. For such an organization or society not a part of, but the whole confession counts, because the Word of God is one. The differentiation between major and minor issues of the doctrine is a human invention.

13) Major and Minor Issues

The error, that only the major issues count and that minor issues are less important, is wide spread.

One all too often hears: "What does it really matter whether or not we agree on all the details of doctrine, whether or not we go to the same church, as long as we

love the Lord Jesus.” In the second half of the previous century this matter occupied the minds of many.

In his *Revision of the Revision legends* (1879), Kuyper rejects this point of view. The non-fundamental articles of the doctrine, according to Kuyper, were not in, but outside, the confession. Kuyper quotes Trigland, “Even if only one article of the doctrine of salvation is denied or obscured, all the others are dissolved or denied.”

Prof. Dr. K. Schilder has put the error of differentiating between major and minor issues in a clear perspective. He writes: “The distinction made between major issues and less important ones is in itself foolish, unscientific, superficial, and misleading - For truth is cloth woven in one piece. The one truth is indissolubly connected to the other. He, who lets go of one dogma, tears apart and upsets everything and will come to a totally new “doctrinal structure.” He, who thinks profoundly and logically, will always construct the one thesis from the other and so maintains both of them, or deletes both of them from his confession.

Already in the previous century, Kuyper pointed out “how confessional relativism and scriptural relativism are mutually related, and how one finds himself on a pernicious slide, if this kind of relativism is introduced. It is subjectivism (arising from the subject, from man). Once captured by it one withdraws himself first from the confession; no word of man in the Church but the Word of God. If, however, it concerns the Scriptures, precisely that same subjectivism, which first raised itself against the confession, comes home to roost. Then those Scriptures concern themselves with ‘the Gospel’, and everything else is secondary.”

In simple words: If one differentiates between major and minor issues in the confessions, one will differentiate eventually between major and minor issues in Scriptures, and in that way the undivided Word of God is lost.

14) The Public Profession of Faith

The form for public profession of faith contains the following question: “Do you acknowledge the doctrine which is contained in the Old and the New Testament and in the articles of the Christian faith and which are taught here in this Christian Church, to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation, and do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this profession in life and death?”

It has been said more than once in the recent past that by “the articles of the Christian faith” the “Apostles Creed” is meant, and that one does not bind oneself to the Three Forms of Unity at the profession of faith. The phrase following “taught here in this Christian Church”, however, makes it clear that our fathers intended the articles or the Christian faith to mean the Forms of Unity for they are taught in the Christian Church. Evidence for this is to be found in the form for public profession used in the Church at Batavia (1621) where the confessor promises “to acknowledge all the doctrines of God’s Word and the Christian reformed religion briefly explained in the Belgic confession and the Heidelberg Catechism.”