

Confessing Churches in Confusing Times (5) The Function of Confessions

Are office bearers sufficiently acquainted to affirm the Form of Subscription (FOS) intelligibly? How well acquainted are they with the confessions? The CRC Task Force for the revision of FOS questions the usefulness of the current form. Its members argue that by accepting the historic confessions as faithful for *their time and place*, we will "avoid a hardening of contextualized truth into timeless truth." They believe that few church leaders can with integrity agree fully with every jot and tittle of the historical confessions. As one of their grounds for the supposed inability to fully subscribe to FOS, they note the growing postmodern sense that one simply cannot, in any definitive fashion, fully subscribe to the understandings from a cultural time and place not one's own. Another argument for a change from FOS to *A Covenant of Ordination* is the "[i]ncreased cultural and ethnic diversity, the increase in new church plants, and the cultural moment often described as postmodernism".

The Task Force highly values the Confessions. And so they should! We cannot live without the confessions of the church; if we do, we set the clock back, and disavow the historic struggle to keep the faith. Dr. H.B. Bavinck noted that without a confession a congregation becomes like a branch torn from the tree and dies. But what do we mean when we say, "We are a confessional church?" A confession is what all of the church says together; the faith jointly professed by its members. It is not the response of an individual believer to God's revelation in the Bible, but the response of the church. In the CRC tradition we always said that a confession, and in our case, the Three Forms of Unity, belong to the CRC as a whole. With the confessions the church says, "these truths we believe together." They express what we believe to be the eternal truths as revealed by God in His Holy Word. Through the confessions we articulate and defend the Word of God. In other words, a confessional article has the same authority as the Word of God until it is shown from Scripture itself that this is not so. Since the Scripture fully expresses the mind of God, we must believe what it teaches (*Belgic Confessions*, Art. 7), and so when one joins the church, he/she binds himself/herself to its confessional stance.

The confessions are a formulation of Scriptural truth for the instruction in the faith, for the opposing of error. They are normative for our faith and practice. Why? Because we believe the doctrines of the church are based on and rest in the Word of God. Therefore, we can articulate together what we believe about God, creation, revelation, the fall, redemption, and things to come. By its very nature a Reformed church is a confessional church. "We all believe in our heart and confess with our mouths..." These are the first words of the *Belgic Confession*, which state that this confession expresses communal faith. Christians are not lone rangers. I cannot emphasize this enough: the confessions belong to the church, the body of Christ, and not to individual believers. Consequently, it is not left at the mercy of an individual's idea what the confessions should mean.

Continuity with the Early Church

In our discussion about the confessions, we tend to forget their ancient roots. The Reformers did not proclaim new truths. The confessions formulated during the Reformation, express the unity of the church. They are used as a touchstone to determine whether one is truthful to the doctrine of the ancient church and the churches of the Reformation. The Reformers did not elevate the confessions above Scripture. They believed that the confessions stand under the authority of Scripture, but if they are faithful expositions of the teachings of Scripture, they are more "than good advice." Furthermore, the Reformers stated that the confessions are in continuity with the ecumenical creeds. This is noted with gratitude in the Belgic Confession Art. 9, which states: "We willingly accept the three ecumenical creeds – the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian – *as well as what the ancient fathers decided in agreement with them.*" Consequently, the Reformed confessions delineate the universal faith expressed in the ancient creeds more specifically than in the ancient creeds.

The Function of Reformed Confessions

Why do we call ourselves Reformed? What it means to be Reformed is defined by the confessions of the Reformed church. Reformed does not describe the cultural, ethnic background of a particular congregation. It is not dependent upon its age, whether recently founded or established long ago. Whether new or old, whether Spanish, African or native American, or Dutch-born Canadian, what binds a Reformed congregation is a shared theology which has stood the test of time and which is articulated in the Reformed Confessions. They speak beyond their time and place and capture timeless truth about the historic Christian faith. They are distinguished by an emphasis on the sovereignty of God, God's election of a people for himself, the centrality of the covenant, worship and life that seeks God's glory in all things and that acknowledges the Lordship of Christ over all things. The doctrines confessed are like building blocks, each doctrine mentioned cannot be missed and not one is superfluous. What then is the function of the confessions? In his article *The Origin of the Form of Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition* (*Calvin Theological Journal*, Nov. 2007) Donald Sinnema sums it up as follows: to confess the faith that a tradition believes; to teach the faith (catechisms); to unify a church tradition that may be dispersed; to define Christian doctrine on difficult issues that may be controversial; to serve as standards of doctrinal orthodoxy by which to reject error; and to explain a theological viewpoint apologetically to avoid misunderstanding (e.g. the original Belgic Confession)

The Canons of Dort and the Belgic Confessions

The Canons of Dort, although they are not well known in detail, also shaped Reformed spirituality. This often misunderstood five-point confession (the TULIP doctrine) is not about salvation determined by God whether we want it or not, it is a hymn of praise devoted to the wonder of assurance of salvation, which is not based on our spiritual experiences but on the promises of the loving covenant God.

The oldest confession of the CRC, one of the finest expositions of Reformation, is the *Belgic Confession*. Our 21st century Reformed churches do well to study it carefully. It does not only go into detail about our doctrines, it also outlines the nature and task of the government of the church. It says the- elders, deacons, along with pastors- make up the council of the church. And "by this means true religion is preserved; true doctrine is able to take its course; and evil men are corrected spiritually and are held in check." The focus of the confession is on the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments by the ministers of the Word. Why the emphasis on the proclamation of the Gospel? Because it is the power of God "for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). But the Gospel is also a stumbling block for all who reject the Lord (1 Pet. 2:8). The confession is not only inclusive, but also exclusive. It excludes ideas not considered orthodox. The confession reflects the Biblical teaching of the antithesis. Jude exhorts his readers to defend the faith (Jude 3). The apostle John calls false teachers, seducers "who are trying to lead you astray" (1 John 2:26). The apostle Paul speaks about "sound doctrine," (literally-healthy doctrine" (Tit. 2:1). And what a responsible task the elders are given! They must maintain "sound doctrine" in the church (Rom.16:17).

Of course, the study of the confessions can never replace the study of Scripture. Doctrine is totally dependent on Scripture. But the church is not a "free-for-all". We remain bound by what we confess together, unless we can prove from Scripture otherwise. For example, John Calvin required of pastors a strict agreement with the doctrines of the church as expressed in the confessions. He did tolerate some individual private interpretations. However, they were not permitted to be taught in public, lest the confessional unity of the church would break.

The Heidelberg Catechism

The structure and the content of the Heidelberg Catechism with its three divisions: Man's misery, Man's Deliverance and Man's Gratitude have deeply penetrated the Reformed soul. Doesn't the Soli Deo Gloria resound in Lord's Day 1? "What is our only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ?" There is no contradiction between Scripture and the catechism. Though the catechism is an old confession, it is enduring because of its Scriptural character. All literature withers like grass but the Word of God remains. The Catechism leads us to the Word, forces us to study the Word. Every sentence is backed by Scripture references. In my library I have a publication entitled *Teksten bij de Heidelbergse Catechismus* (Texts with the Heidelberg Catechism). Its 81 pages contain nothing but Scripture texts. The Catechism's constant appeal to Scripture keeps this confession alive, well and relevant for all time. Let me point you to the evangelical nature of the Catechism by showing you how the authors relate it to Scripture.

We know the mediator through the gospel (Q. & A.19). What is true faith? Everything God reveals in His Word is true (Q. & A.21). What must a Christian believe? Everything God promises us in the Gospel (Q. & A.22). We speak of one God: Father, Son and

Holy Spirit "because that is how God has revealed Himself in His Word (Q. & A.25). Christ is King who governs us by His Word and Spirit (Q. & A. 31). The Son of God gathers His Church through His Spirit and the Word (Q. & A.54). The Holy Spirit produces faith in our hearts by the preaching of the Holy Gospel (Q. & A.65). The sacraments help us to understand more clearly the promise of the Gospel (Q. & A. 66). The Holy Spirit teaches us in the Gospel (Q. & A.67). Through the preaching of the Gospel, the Kingdom of Heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers (Q. & A. 84). These references show that the authors of the Catechism wanted nothing but the living Word of God proclaimed and taught. The Catechism is also a powerful apologetic for our time. It asks at one decisive point, "What good does it do you, however, to believe all this?" The answer: "In Christ I am right with God and heir to life everlasting." (Q. & A. 59) This question of "what good does it do?" may well be used, as in principle it has been since the days of the Church Fathers, to test any proposed interpretation of the Incarnation of Christ and to draw out its meaning. That's why the Catechism is a timeless confession. It enshrines the truth of the Gospel, not only what it tells us about Jesus, but what it tells us about God. It distinguishes truth from falsehoods. One of the questions it raises is: If it is true what we confess about Christ, what difference does it make?

Today, there is a growing interest in Jesus and the early church. For example, this past Christmas season, the media featured a book by liberal scholars of the Jesus Seminar vintage Marcus Borg and John Dominic titled, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth*. Dr. Erwin Lutzer, senior pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago notes that today's culture is ripe with false portraits of Jesus, and the situation isn't helped when celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey colour the playing field. "The thing is that Oprah teaches that Jesus is one way among many, and that God is more interested in our hearts than he is in whether or not we believe in Jesus. And she is a microcosm of what happens in America, a microcosm of what Americans believe, that Jesus is great, but he's not the only way to God." And Dr. Lutzer cites a serious erosion of biblical doctrine as the primary factor behind the confusion about the Christ of the Bible. The Catechism clearly confesses and explains the the uniqueness of Christ as the only Saviour from sin. "Why is the Son of God called 'Jesus' meaning 'Savior'? Because he saves us from our sins. Salvation cannot be found in anyone else; it is futile to look for any salvation elsewhere" (Lord's Day 11, Q. & A. 29).

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