

Committee confessing church (CBK)

believing together,
confessing together

(This report has been translated with the help of DeepL.com, and afterwards edited by one of our committee members. If ambiguities arise through translation, the original Dutch report shall prevail!)



To Synod Deventer 2023

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Letter of presentation to Synod Deventer 2023

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Letter of presentation to Synod Deventer 2023

To the members of Synod

Amersfoort, July 5th 2023

Subject: presentation report committee on professing church (CBK)

Members of synod, beloved brothers and sisters,

We hereby present to you the report of the Committee 'Confessing Church'. We began our work in July 2022 and before you is the result of our work. The task we have been given is vast and important: it concerns the identity, the heart of the churches.

Our exploration led us to conclude that the confession of the churches needs to be enlivened. Less and less often we confess together as a church community and more and more often in other places, in other forms and with other people. We distinguish six functions of confession - each function differs in what is going on and what we think is needed. This requires further reflection. Our reflections on the content of confession and binding to it are also not yet complete. With these initial results of our exploration, we hope to have inspired enough confidence for a follow-up assignment.

Our report consists of a compact policy report. That report contains the main insights and considerations and provides a basis for deciding on a follow-up assignment. The substantive report of our exploration is attached as a separate report (61.1). In it you will find the substantive exploration of the practice of confession, the developments that contribute to it, the biblical and historical lines, and a look ahead to the sequel.

Our work is not yet complete, but already it is clear that we think it is necessary to enliven the confession. This is not something we can do alone as a committee. It is our conviction that we must seek and work together with the local churches. We would like to ask you, as representatives of the churches, to think with us: if congregations have to set to work themselves, what kind of material and guidance do they need? As a committee we would like to have one or more half-days to exchange ideas with you about this. We would be happy to discuss this with you during the Synod.

We wish you God's blessing in your work.,

The committee 'Confessing church',

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1. Why a committee 'confessing church'?

With the reunification of the Reformed Churches (liberated) and the Dutch Reformed Churches, the Committee Confessing Church was also appointed. Two church communities with a common and different past and different customs and practices have found each other again. What will become their common sound? How will they be known together in the world? What message will they bring? These questions involve (also) the confession of the church. The assignment given to the committee was this: 'explore in what ways the churches can confess their faith in view of this and the times to come and how the anchoring of the churches to the teachings of the Bible can be reshaped.'

Confessing touches the heart of the church and church people. Being a confessing church is so much more than just having a document of confession. It is about how we as church people individually and together live our faith with heart, mouth and hands. It is about the identity of the church in word and deed. As a committee, we have studied what confession and the function of confession is. How do we interpret confession in the 21st century and how do the confessions we have as churches function? How does that help us stay close to God's Word? Or is it necessary to organize or shape confession differently? What can we do as churches to be and remain a confessing church?

The committee conducted an initial exploration, the results of which can be found in abbreviated form in this brief report. In expanded form, the results can be read in the substantive report, which you will find attached to this report.

The next paragraph contains the key insights from the reconnaissance we did.

Paragraph 3 shows how we approached the exploration. Our work is not finished - the exploration revealed that a follow-up is needed.

Paragraph 4 concludes with a proposal for how that follow-up might take shape.

2. Being a confessing church together

To consider how we can continue to be a confessing church in the future, we as a committee first pause to consider the question: what is confessing? Our substantive report describes how we are currently confessing church in practice, what the biblical teaching on confession is and how confession, teaching and liturgy have been handled in the past. We refer to the appendix for its content. We conclude this section with an initial exploration of what is needed to remain confessing church in the future and how we can enliven our confession.

What is confession?

Confession is more than having a confession document. It is an indispensable part of our living relationship with the triune God: we confess and show that we believe in God as our God and savior. A confessing church is a church that tells of God's great deeds and what God promises in Jesus Christ. Confession is done from the heart. The church lives by what the Lord pledges and promises in the good news. At the same time, she rejects what contradicts or damages her communion with her Lord. Before the face of God, among ourselves, before future generations and before the world, we as a church express our faith in the triune God in an inviting and distinctive way.

We cannot do that by ourselves. We are self-centered and sinful people - fortunately, God makes his name known to us, has set us free and gives us his grace. God's name and grace evoke our response. That response is essential. True love comes from both sides. God gave us to his Son to give us a new existence in his Son as citizens of his kingdom. His love in Christ makes us new. He pours out his love into our hearts through his Spirit. And so we are called to respond full of love with all our lives. We learn that from previous generations and may pass it on to new generations. Our confession is part of that response.

For confession we have different forms and practices with different functions. As a committee, we distinguish different functions of confessing. By confessing:

1. We praise God and express our faith. We do this to honor God in the liturgy and beyond, and in response to the gospel.
2. Connect ourselves to the community of believers. We do this within various communities. We are thus connected to Jesus Christ (in faithfulness to the gospel of Christ, building on the teaching of the apostles), to the world church (we profess the Catholic Christian faith), to the churches that share the Reformed confession, to the churches within our own denomination (the Dutch Reformed churches) and within our own local congregation.
3. Offer orientation in the life of faith. Confession helps to find one's way in life with the triune God. In confession comes life wisdom and teaching about the good life. Confession helps find answers to questions of ethics (law) and spirituality (prayer).
4. Do we pass on the faith to future generations. The tradition of faith takes place in the midst of our Christian life in our congregation, in our home, in the world. Explicitly it takes shape in preaching, teaching, catechesis and other forms of youth work.
5. Do we bear witness to our faith. Thus we tell those around us who Jesus Christ is for us and give an account of our hope in the world.
6. Do we protect one another in the church from error and falsehood. We help each other to discern what matters, so as to connect in love and truth and to contradict and refute error and falsehood.

How can we confess vitally in our time?

Our exploration leads to the observation that the confessing of the church is under pressure: in today's culture and with today's questions, it is not easy to confess vitally together within a church community. Many shared routines, traditions and practices have disappeared and have been replaced by alternatives outside the church community and in line with one's own preferences. At the same time, we see that many new forms and practices have appeared that are more in line with today's questions and appropriate to today's visual culture. There is more and more material, but we spend less and less time confessing together as a church community.

As a committee, we conclude: being a confessing church is a biblical mission. God makes Himself known to us through His Word. Our confessions help us to serve God together, they want to keep us with Him but cannot match the eternal and inexhaustible Word of God. No confessional text replaces Scripture; we must always allow our views and representations to be corrected by the insight the Spirit gives us in the Bible. In doing so, we may trust the Spirit to lead us in finding texts and practices to be a living confessing church in this day and age.

Each confession responds to the questions of the time about faith. That begs the question, what are those questions of our time? Do our confessions adequately answer them? We observe: older texts are binding, newer texts often are not. What does binding mean and what do you bind to? How should questions about binding be interpreted in today's cultural context? In any case, our analysis of history shows that updating existing texts, writing new texts and developing new practices is of all times. We therefore prefer to speak of the "enlivenment" of our confession rather than its "anchoring," as our mission states. This can take the form of opening up existing confessions differently as well as discovering new practices or creating new texts and songs.

As a committee, we want to commit ourselves to the churches' mission of being a living confessing church. This requires thinking through a number of questions that we have not gotten to at this time. Our process is not yet complete. However, we can already indicate that an intervention is needed if we want to have a living confession as churches. In paragraph 4 we will indicate how we see this task ahead of us.

3. Assignment accomplished

The Committee Confessing Church began its work in July 2022 and met seven times. The meetings were at least half a day, several times a day and once a weekend of reflection. In our meetings, we always took time to study the Bible together and encounter God with each other.

The committee's assignment was to do an exploration. To do so, we employed the practical-theological method of Richard R. Osmer. In his book *Practical Theology*, he identifies four core tasks for practical theology:

1. The descriptive-empirical task: what happens?
2. The interpretive task: why does this happen?
3. The normative task: what should be done?
4. The pragmatic task: how could we respond?

For the first two questions, we conducted our own analysis based on the experience and knowledge we have as a committee. In addition, we held open discussions with pastors, elders and experts from various GKv, NGK and PKN churches. These conversations focused on the question: how do you give form to confession in the church in practice and what do you see as developments in it? The results can be found in Chapter 2 of the substantive report.

The third question, the normative (What should be going on?) we picked up in different ways:

1. A study of the biblical fundamentals on confession.
2. Exploring and discussing many of the well-known confessional scriptures on origin, form and content.
3. Studying the development of our churches' confessions throughout history.

The results of this can largely be read in chapters 3 and 4 of the content report. We have not finished discussing and analyzing the various confessional writings; we want to take more time for that in a future committee. The results also produced the division into six functions of the confession in the churches. We can link the functions to the practice of our confession, which is also done in the content report.

We do not answer the last question (How can we respond?) because it is too early for that. Based on the problem analysis, we do note that intervention is needed. The practice of confession has changed, but also diminished. The forms in which we are accustomed to professing and teaching are less and less in keeping with today's visual culture. Whether the same is true of the content is another question that we do not yet answer. In any case, the confession of the churches needs vitalization, a follow-up task to which we are happy to commit ourselves.

Tasks we want to complete as part of our exploration include further discussion and appreciation of the texts and practices of confession: are they sufficiently useful for the functions of confession in this day and age or are new texts/practices needed? We also want to examine the attachment to the texts and practices. Based on the analysis of the situation and our appreciation of it, we see at least two key tasks for a subsequent committee or committees:

1. Advising on the content of confession and its binding. We want to answer the question if either there is a need for new texts/forms that respond to the questions of our time or opening up what is already there in a different way is more obvious. This includes advice on the binding character and status of texts. This part of our work includes a number of church law and liturgical choices and is theologically and church historically far-reaching. It requires a reasoned opinion with direction, proposals and consequences so that the next Synod can decide on them (intervention on content, binding).
2. To explore and possibly initiate a process in which we support the churches in teaching, witnessing and community, paying attention to practices and forms appropriate to this time

(intervention on form). Should the analysis in the first task reveal a need for new content, this too will become part of the process we want to undertake with and for the churches.

The next paragraph elaborates these core tasks into a new mission for the committee 'confessing church'.

4. New assignment

The Committee 'Confessing Church' was established to do an exploration. That exploration raised a number of questions that we cannot yet answer. Therefore, we think a follow-up is needed. We hope with the report, of our work so far, to have instilled enough confidence in you to continue our work. Thus we can work toward clear recommendations on the content and functioning of our ecclesial confession and its enlivenment in the practice of our lives as churches and Christians.

In that sequel we see two tracks:

1. A follow-up task, leading to a recommendation to the next synod on the content of the confession and its functioning. This is an incidental task that can be completed before the next synod in 2026. The exploration provides an answer to the question of whether intervention is needed on the content of confession and whether intervention is needed on the binding of confession. The cost of carrying out this task will consist primarily of meeting expenses and travel costs.
2. One intervention that is needed in any case, is a process in which the vitalization of confession has a place. The committee will explore ways in which this process can be designed and begin to develop materials for this process. If it emerges from track 1 that there is a need for new content, this too will become part of the assignment/process. Ultimately, it will not be the committee that will have to do the work, but local churches will have a role. The costs for this task will include meeting expenses, travel expenses as well as developing and producing materials. It is expected that this task will continue beyond the next synod and the cost of this task is more difficult to predict.