

Report Committee professing church (CBK)

Content report

(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!)

For the Synod of Deventer 2023

Table of contents

Introduction	4
1. Current church practice of confession	6
Introduction	6
Six functions of confession	6
What is happening?	7
How do we interpret what is happening?	10
2. Biblical lines around the theme of confession.	12
From the Old Testament	12
From the New Testament	13
Summary	16
3. Review of the history of our confession	17
Creeds of the Early Church	17
Confessions of the Reformation	17
Nineteenth century	18
Confessions in twentieth and twenty-first centuries	19
The (shared and reunited) house of liberation	19
Catechesis and formation	20
Liturgy	21
What observations do we make?	22
4. How do we move forward?	23
Good texts	23
Good communication tools	24
A good process	24
In conclusion	24

Introduction

As we listened to Matthew 28 together as a Confessing Church Committee at the start of our assignment, what it says in verse 18 struck us all: "Jesus came near." He comes to us, He teaches us, He has all power, and He is with us. That is a hopeful perspective: when Jesus comes to us, we can be close to Him and He can take shape in us. When Jesus comes to us, He brings us to the Father and we can become images of God again. That Jesus comes closer awakens desire to live close to God, guided by His Spirit. From that desire, we set to work on our mission to reflect on a confessing church.

Encountering God and living in God's presence are not separate from confession. Indeed, in encountering God, we are called to confess. The people of Israel answered Joshua, "Of course we will serve the LORD, for he is our God" (Josh. 24:18). Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you think I am?" Peter then answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15-16). The church is a church that confesses its Lord or it is not a church.

The newly formed church faces the challenge of being a professing church at a time when much is happening and when faith in God is an option, not a given.

As a committee, we reflected together on our confession and our calling to be a confessing church. We did this at a time when two churches united to form the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. Both churches shared the same confession, but sometimes dealt with it differently. The newly formed church faces the challenge of being a confessing church at a time when much is happening and when faith in God is an option, not a given. In the newly-formed church we see a field of tension with at least three poles: a. in the case of mainly former members of the GKV, a reaction to their own past with an attitude of "away with us"; b. in the case of mainly former members of the NGK, a fear of the straitjacket that they saw in the GKV in the past; c. in the case of mainly former members of the GKV, grief at the loss of their old familiar Reformed church. In this field of tension, it is a challenge to be a confessing church in true solidarity. That is why our committee has been appointed with the task of "exploring how the churches can confess their faith with an eye to this and future time and how the anchoring of the churches to the teachings of the Bible can be reshaped.

In our exploration, we realized that this task has many facets. Gradually we also came to the realization that the question of anchoring our confession is not the first question. It is preceded by the question of how we are confessing churches today, in a living and vital way. It is about shaping and passing on the response we give in faith to God.

Therefore, confession is an indispensable part of our living relationship with the Triune God: we confess that we believe in God as our God and Savior. It is more than having a confessional document. 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 and in communion with one another. In confessing you notice that the church lives by what the Lord promises and promises in the good news. Confession is speaking to God, to one another, to future generations, and to the world. In confessing, the church expresses her faith in the Triune God. This invites and shows who she is.

How we confess who God is to us and who we are with Him changes over time.

Confession is actually very simple, yet not obvious. It is about who God is and about who we are with Him, but people have to learn again and again to take notice of God. This applies to people of the past and of today, because in Adam we have become self-centered and cramped people. Fortunately, God makes His name known to us, frees us and gives His grace. Already in the announcement of God's name to Moses (Ex. 34:6,7) we discover that He knows who people are. God is wonderfully great. He remains true to Himself

and He remains true to us. He loved us and gave His Son that we might live and be reconciled to Him (1 John 4:9,10). What else can we do but magnify Him and praise His grace? God's name and God's grace call us to respond full of love with all our lives. We learn this from previous generations and may pass it on to new generations. Our confession is part of that response.

At the same time: *how* we confess who God is to us and who we are with Him changes over time. In the Early Church, the central belief was that Christ, our savior, is God and man (fourth and fifth centuries). The Church professed this belief in the doctrine of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. In the sixteenth century, during the Reformation, the focus was on how people share in the salvation of God. In the centuries that followed, the study of creation claimed its place. Another and profound development is the process of secularization. In the mind of many today, our world is separate from God, if He exists at all. Like the view of God, the view of man also changed. These changes all affect how we confess our faith in God. We live as the church of Christ in the context of the 21st century, and in that world we reflect on our vocation as a confessing church.

Therefore, it is important for our confession not to become rigid. Nor would that be fitting for God: the second commandment forbids making an image of the LORD. Moreover, it is not possible to capture God in an image. It is God's voice, His Word that gives life and prompts to life. This living Word must bear living fruit through the Spirit in our confession. But God's Word which is for all times is never known by us in its fullness and depth. Even our common knowledge as a church and our confessions remain imperfect. This does not mean that God would speak to us in secret language and that we could not say anything meaningful about Him. God truly reveals Himself and He makes Himself known to us in His Word which is a bright light. He teaches us to speak about Him by His Spirit. But we remain human beings, with our limitations and sins. Our confessions help us to deal with God but they cannot match the eternal and inexhaustible Word of God. Always we may have our own representations corrected and refreshed by what the Spirit teaches us in and through God's Word. Every age has its own questions and problems. Therefore, in every age different emphases in God's Word light up and every age requires new articulation of enduring core truths.

Among other things, we arrived at initial recommendations as a result of our assignment.

In this report we share the results of our reflection on confession and on a confessing church. We have looked at current practice. We considered the functions of our confession and the different practices in which it has a place. Furthermore, we have sharpened and deepened our vision of our confession from the Bible and history. We also arrived at initial recommendations in response to our assignment: "to explore in what way the churches can confess their faith with a view to this and the future time, and how the anchoring of the churches to the teachings of the Bible can be reshaped.

We used the practical theological method of Richard R. Osmer in our process. 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 is this happening?
3. The normative task: what should be done?
4. The pragmatic task: how might we respond?

We look first at the situation in the churches today and seek an explanation of what we see happening (2. Practice today). This chapter is partly descriptive-empirical, partly interpretive in nature. This is followed by two chapters consistent with the normative task. We begin with an overview of Biblical lines about confession, from the Old and New Testaments (3. Biblical lines). This is followed by a chapter with a brief historical sketch of how confession has developed in the Christian church (4. Review of History). Finally, we look to the future and formulate starting points for a follow-up task (5. How do we move forward?).

We sincerely hope that the reflection, research, report and recommendations of our committee have your approval and confidence. We also hope that they will contribute to a widely supported decision to continue the committee's work, and thus to achieve for the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands a renewed common confession and a cordial and lively connection to the contemporary reality of faith.

1. The current church practice of confessing

Introduction

We want to be a confessing church and in many ways we are as churches today. To connect with the current practice of confession, we have reflected on that practice and tried to map it out. In this chapter we describe our view of church practice and give our interpretation of it. This chapter thus encompasses both Osmer's descriptive-empirical task and interpretive task: what is happening and how do we interpret what is happening?

Six functions of confession

To map the practice, we distinguish six functions of confession.

By confessing:

1. Do 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 so 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 confess the Catholic Christian faith), to the churches that share the Reformed confession, to the churches within our own denomination (the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands) 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 transmission 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. This is how we tell those around us who Jesus Christ is for us and give an account of our hope in the world.
6. Protect one another in the congregation from error and falsehood. We help each other to discern what matters, so as to connect in love and truth and contradict and refute error and falsehood.

Table 1 lists the different functions, combined with practices in which we find that function of confession:

Function of confession	Practices in which this happens
1. Praising and believing	Confession reading in the church service Singing (confessing) songs Confession in response to questions in the liturgy (at baptism, profession of faith, the Lord's Supper, confirmation of ministers) Participating in baptism and the Lord's Supper
2. Connecting	Praying and confessing together Sharing faith (faith conversations) and recognizing faith with each other Ecumenical contact with other churches Expressing shared faith within a church context Subscription to confessions by ministers
3. Orientation	Teaching about the content of the Christian faith Teaching about spiritual practices (prayer, baptism, the Lord's Supper) Teaching about Christian living
4. Tradition	Preaching Liturgical forms Children's and youth work (catechesis) Equipping and formation
5. Witnessing	Meetings and conversations Organized forms of evangelization Material in leaflets and on websites Testimony in society and politics
6. Protection	Faith Conversations Pastorate Binding form/office bearer's vows Overseeing one another in ministry and congregation Discussions church council

What is happening?

Much happens that we do not see because God Himself is at work. A confessing church is God's church, not our church. What we do is included in what God is doing. In the church, God the Father Himself is at work. God sent His Son Jesus Christ who is head of the body and foundation of our life and community. Because we share in Him, we can be confessing church. Moreover, God poured out his Spirit on us. The Spirit is present and fills us. He gives us the mind of Christ from which we can confess. He gives us faith, insight, wisdom and boldness.

God works through people and what they do: through the believers in the tradition who came before us, through our brothers and sisters today, and He also wants to work in and through us. We are part of a global community, of all times, languages and cultures. Our confession is not an end in itself. Our confession is about fidelity to God, fidelity to the gospel of Jesus Christ, fidelity to the church of the Triune God.

When it comes to confession, attention quickly turns to the three Reformed confessional documents

An important event for our churches is the reunification of the Dutch Reformed Churches (NGK) and the Reformed Churches (liberated) (GKv) on May 1. This reunification is the concrete occasion for the new Reformed Churches in The Netherlands to reflect on confession. How are we together today a confessing church?

In that question, all six functions of confession are important: praise and believe, connecting, orientation, tradition, witnessing and protection. When it comes to confession, attention quickly turns to the three Reformed confessional texts (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt). This is not surprising because in the past these texts played a (quite) large role in all six functions. Through sermons and catechesis, the HC played a major role (believing, orientation, tradition). As forms of unity, they were important in connecting and protecting.

The two churches that will unite share and commit themselves to the same Reformed confessions. At the same time, GKv and NGK have differences, including in their handling of these three "forms of unity." In the GKv, 'commitment to doctrine' has long been central (emphasis on the functions of connecting and protecting). However, this has led to a countermovement in which in parts of the church the distance from the documents has increased. The significance of confessions for all functions has declined. The use of liturgical forms has declined. New hymns are judged much less than before for their content, and popular songs from a few mega-churches (such as Hillsong and Bethel) are also widely sung in the NGK. Within the former NGK, commitment to the confessions was shaped differently and more diversely, and the confessional writings are less well known. As a result, there is less resistance to these texts, at the same time they are openly criticized in the NGK more than in the GKv. In the various functions of confession, the three confessions played a less prominent role than in the GKv. Rather, the focus was on the Bible alone. In both churches we see that in recent decades an increasing diversity has emerged. This diversity is evident in the handling of the confessional texts and liturgical forms. There are congregations where the use of the texts is still alive, while in other congregations this is no longer the case and more use is made of alternative texts. Some have grown up with the confessions, others do not know the texts and phrases (anymore). Traditions such as signing the confessional documents are experienced and appreciated differently. In our society, it is increasingly unusual to bind oneself to an institution or let it dictate what one should believe. We also notice this in the church.

Two credo texts most people still know (Apostolicum and Nicaea), what is in the HC is less known, and about the DL church members know little more.

In addition to a diversity of congregations, there is also a diversity of views within congregations. In their orientation, congregation members are no longer guided only by the Reformed confessions and tradition but get their information and inspiration from everywhere. This can be at the expense of mutual solidarity, especially if differences are not discussed. Young people in many congregations do profession of faith later and later or not at all. The question is being asked whether church structures are still in tune with younger generations. At the same time, we see that churches are a source of activity both in the church and in society. Our different views do not get in the way of that.

Beyond this diversity, we see across the breadth of the churches that the significance of the confessional texts for all six of the aforementioned functions of confession is declining. The creeds are less and less known and shape less and less the faith of church members. Two credo texts most people still know (Apostolicum and Nicaea), what is in the HC is less known, and about the CoD church members know little anymore. The signing of confessional texts still takes place, but the less known they are the more this becomes automatic. Signing is also increasingly questioned. There is much less preaching on the HC,

especially now that afternoon services have been abolished in many places, due in part to the corona pandemic. In catechesis, the creeds have hardly been discussed for some time. Moreover, catechesis and youth club/association are increasingly being combined. Where the significance of the creedal texts diminishes, the communal bonding also disappears, if something else does not take its place that stimulates this communion.

The way confession in all its functions (praising and believing, connecting, orientation, tradition, witnessing and protection) is also changing. Previously there were catechism sermons, Bible study societies and clubs, church magazines and book series. Now, where we see groups of Christians seeking each other out and actively confessing together, it happens in other forms. There are men's days, women's weekends and summer conferences. There is more focus on the Spirit, an increased emphasis on experience, often question-based and non-church-based. Music has taken on a much larger role. In addition, images have become an important carrier of information. Furthermore, we see a reevaluation of rituals, physicality and the use of senses. These new forms that are emerging can lead to revived and deepened faith. At the same time, we see a shift from congregation-wide meetings to meetings of like-minded believers.

Is there a decline when it comes to confession itself, in the various functions of confession (praising and believing, connecting, orientation, tradition, witnessing and protection)? The shrinking size of churches may indicate this. In some churches youth work is running fine, in other churches many teenagers no longer attend church or catechism. Some churches have great difficulty finding ministers, musicians or youth workers. Many churches have lost members due to the corona pandemic or at least see some of their members not at church services or much less. However, we only see this happening from the outside and have limited ability to see what this means for faith and confession itself.

The content of the texts is still relevant today, but the texts from the 16^{de} century answered, in the language and form of their time, problems that were at the center of attention at the time.

In society we see secularization, a great decline in knowledge of the Christian faith and a need for meaning and community. Often churches are seen as institutions that have come to an end. So there is a need for good and clear explanations of the content of the Christian faith. It is all the more important that churches be recognizable and visible in speech and action as a source of meaning and as a place where Christ is found. This raises the question of whether our confession, the content of the confessions and the practices of confession are in line with the questions that people have (around ecology, gender, polarization, freedom). Thereby, the questions asked outside the church are equally alive within the church.

So with all the changes in our world, there are questions about the confessions. The questions concern the content of the texts, such as the language of Article 1 NGB about God's being and attributes, the reasoning in Sunday 5-6 of the HC that Jesus Christ should be designated as the mediator, or the language about the Papacy in Sunday 30 of the HC. But the form of relatively long confessions and the medium of a printed text also raise questions. The content of the texts is still relevant, but the texts from the 16^{de} century answered in the language and form of their time problems that were the center of attention at the time. The world looks different now. New texts have appeared (think of *Our World Belongs to God* or the *Gewone Catechismus (Ordinary Catechism, in Dutch)*), which do not have the status of a binding confessional text. But does the form of a text still meet the needs of people today anyway? A new generation is growing up with images and videos. A culture of word and book is increasingly becoming a culture of image and sound. What that means for confession, we do not yet oversee.

Conclusion: so there is a lot going on around confession, there is diversity in dealing with confessional texts, the common unity in faith is taking less shape, the confessional texts play a lesser role in the different aspects of confession (praising and believing, connecting, orientation, tradition, witnessing and

protecting) and in the shaping of confession in all its functions much is changing. All this requires interpretation and interpretation, which we address below.

How do we interpret what is happening?

When we try to understand and explain what is happening in our churches, we realize that there are two opposing movements. On the one hand, God is building His church on the way to the final coming of His Kingdom. On the other hand, there are opposing forces of the devil at work, there is the world as a whole of structures going against God, and sin is there in our own existence. Therefore, it is important to be alert to the condition of our own hearts and the larger developments around us.

Stronger, however, than our concerns is our trust in God's coming Kingdom. In this light, changes taking place have something twofold: through changes our confession can lose strength, and through changes there can be more room in us for Christ. We believe in a crucified Lord who gives new life where the cross is borne.

We see developments in the world around us of which we are also a part as confessing Christians, and we see developments affecting the church itself. Below we address both categories, first the developments that characterize our world:

1. Secularization: in our part of the world, the meaning of Christian faith is declining, churches are getting smaller and Christian faith is no longer taken for granted. The impact of believing is becoming limited and religious life easily disappears into the private sphere. As a result, believing in Christ as a confessing church has become more a matter of going against the grain. The Christian faith is seen as outdated and no longer relevant. Under pressure from the secularized world around us, faith easily crumbles. For those who do go against the grain, the Christian faith is no longer obvious.
2. Prosperity growth: prosperity in our society has increased and consumption has grown tremendously as a result. This encourages a sense of life in which God is no longer needed. At the same time, the heart's desire becomes easily focused on money and goods. This can be at the expense of commitment to our confession.
3. The five i's: the structure of society is changing; this change is represented by five i's: individualization, informalization, information, internationalization and intensification. *Individualization* leads to individual religious practice being valued more highly than before, while collective and communal practice can count on less appreciation. Believing has become an individual matter. For a confessing church, *informalization* means that less value is attached to classic texts, to formal agreements and to everything that comes with an institution. *Information* means that church members themselves seek to enrich and deepen their faith, using the diversity of Christian traditions as a source. *Internationalization* results in looking beyond national borders and Christian networks becoming international (New Wine, Hillsong, Vineyard, etc.). *Intensification* creates a desire for intense experiences, while what is ordinary and comes with tradition (such as confessions) is easily dismissed as boring.
4. Postmodernity: there are also cultural changes that fall under the heading of postmodernity. The ideals of modernity are no longer pursued. Unity is no longer the ideal, but plurality. Rationality is not valued highest, but emotion and experience. Certainty is no longer sought, but uncertainty and relativity are accepted as given. Conviction is seen as no longer attainable; doubt is what remains. Serious big words are experienced as heavy and oppressive; the alternative is lightheartedness and humor. The Reformed tradition took shape in the same cultural climate as modernity. Connection and national unity, rationality and clarity, big words and conviction also typified the handling of (Reformed) confession. From a postmodern perspective, this is viewed with suspicion or alienation. This puts pressure on the traditional forms in which we were a Reformed confessing church. At the same time, we are faced with the challenge of reshaping a convinced Christian confession.
5. Human-centeredness: as faith adapts to these new circumstances, the emphasis easily comes to lie on personal well-being and fulfilment. The individual person has become important while faith has

lost public relevance and is no longer reckoned with God's presence in the world. This is referred to as "moralistic therapeutic deism" (Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton).

6. Crises: after the easygoing prosperous (post)modern unconcern, we are increasingly confronted with crises of all kinds. Individually, people experience loneliness, performance pressure or meaninglessness. Nationally, we see increasing polarization and experience the influence of conspiracy thinking. Globally, we notice that we are vulnerable, because of corona and the ecological crisis, because of economic and political instability. This puts pressure on existing relationships and accelerates processes that are already underway. It also poses the question of the vitality of our faith: where do we find footing? How resilient and meaningful is our confession? We see the information society reflected in a growing diversity among church members as they make use of all kinds of different (online) sources.
7. Reactionary movements: the developments and crises described evoke resistance. Neoliberal policies have led to the breakdown of social cohesion and social services. Among those who cannot keep up in modern society, all changes evoke unease and discomfort. We see people searching for new footing and a new perspective. This can be found in a (constructed) past of traditional patterns, values and communities. A reformed past with everything that goes with it can be given this role. In contrast, people seek footing in new moral ideals and in struggles for equality for all races, colors, and genders (#blacklivematters, LGBTQI). The struggle for social justice is easily linked to the struggle for ecological justice. This in turn can lead to polarization around confessions, liturgy, female office bearers, a "climate religion," or discussions of gender.

As already mentioned, these general, broad developments have an impact on how we deal with the classic confessions of the church. In addition, related to this but at the same time more specific, we see developments in our own churches that were and are influential. Which ones?

1. From our histories, we see differences between (the former) NGK and GKv. Those histories have led to painful and traumatic memories of how confessions and differences were handled in the past. The NGK gave more room for the independence of local congregations. At the same time, the emphasis was often on the Bible more than on confession or tradition. Moreover, many NGK congregations are more diverse because congregation members come from a wide variety of church backgrounds. Many practical arrangements have been designed at the national level over the years. In the past, the GKv have valued confession and tradition more highly and sought more uniformity in church life. In the present, this leads to a reaction whereby forms in which the confessional texts emerge are placed in the background and disappear.
2. Against the background of a history of conflict, division and reconciliation, the GKv and the NGK (since May 1 of this year the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) are looking for new forms of being church. This means actively giving space to change and new developments.
3. In the past, the world of the GKv and (to a lesser extent) NGK was a Reformed and Dutch world. In international contacts, the Dutch perspective was dominant. That (rather) isolated existence in ecclesiastical Holland has largely come to an end. The new church will participate in all kinds of cooperation and has numerous ecclesiastical contacts outside that familiar world.
4. Not everyone is happy with these developments. Within the GKv, changes around liturgy, female office bearers and reconciliation with the NGK have caused discomfort. Not everyone could or wanted to go along with these developments. In recent years, this has led to a number of break-offs and church members leaving for other churches such as the CGK and PKN.
5. Changes in culture affect attitudes toward confession. Formal aspects and rules, a more rational approach to religious content or a shared collective confession lost their self-evidence. One's own faith, one's own perception and experience, one's own connection to confession became more important. Faith could no longer be an automatism or a matter of prescribed faith content. This is beautiful on the one hand, but on the other hand it also makes faith and confession vulnerable. After all, in our world, our heart's desire is also under pressure: there is much more demanding attention than God alone. Our hearts are (unfortunately) far from always full of convinced faith.

6. Individualization, affluence in our consumer society and desire for experience can lead churchgoers to act as consumers. Then church becomes a place to get religious products. This is at odds with discipleship, which involves trust, obedience and growth in faith .
7. We also see that appreciation for theological reflection has declined. In part, this is due to past theological conflicts or doctrinal rigor experienced as compelling. It is also because throughout our society, reflection is regularly perceived as unnecessary theorizing . Classic words ("covenant") are more quickly perceived as boring and outdated, and interest in theological clarification has diminished. Many theological challenges are coming to the church, and a fresh new consideration of the Christian faith is needed.
8. In the church, too, we see polarization as the extremes grow larger and the middle grows smaller or does not make itself heard. This means that the connection in shared confession is under pressure and deserves renewed attention.

2. Biblical lines around the theme of confession

Why are the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands committed to being confessing churches? What drives us? What do we have in mind and what could our confessing church be all about? This chapter outlines from the Bible motives for and functions and practices of confession. In doing so, we make the transition in this chapter to what Osmer calls "the normative task." We saw in the previous chapter what is happening in practice and gave an interpretation of this. In this chapter, we listen to the Bible.

From the Old Testament

Communal and personal confession has been part of our humanity from the beginning. The people of Israel also confessed God as God, creator and redeemer. So lines can be drawn from the Old Testament about our confession.

1. Created in God's image

God created us human beings in His image with a unique responsibility (Gen. 1:26-28). God wants us as human beings to be living references to Him and to speak and act on His behalf. In doing so, we must not seek to possess the knowledge of good and evil on our own (Gen. 2:16,17) but rely on God's instruction (His *Torah*) and guidance (Ps. 25:14; 73:24). Our humanity is from the very beginning laid out to confess and honor God.

2. Faith response in the covenant

In the covenant God makes with Israel, He promises them His love and faithfulness without condition beforehand. That covenant begins with God's grace. From His people He then expects trust and love in return.

At every update of the covenant, He points the people to His grace and His demonstrated goodness. At the same time, the people also speak out again and again. Convinced, they declare their willingness to serve God (Ex. 19; Deut. 29; Josh. 24; Neh. 10). In the covenant of grace, God Himself makes a commitment. With that comes a response: God's people also assume an obligation. That "man's work" of Israel, as a believing response, is an essential part of the relationship in the covenant.

The LORD commands Israel to continue remembering His great deeds, thanking and praising Him for them and passing them on to future generations.

3. Connectedness takes shape

Confession is part of God's covenant. It is part of how that covenant takes shape. That covenant takes shape in teaching and laws (God's *torah*).

The LORD puts in writing His covenant with Israel. In the ark are the two stone tablets containing the ten words. God's intention is for these words to be written in the hearts of His people (Jer. 31:33).

Important for Israel, therefore, is the continued teaching of God's great deeds and of God's will. The LORD commands Israel to continue to remember His great deeds, to thank and praise Him for them and to pass them on to future generations (Deut. 6:7; 11:1-9; Josh. 4:21-24; Ps. 78). It is about the people being familiar with the LORD and joyfully following Him. This includes Israel answering and confessing who God is to them.

Typical of God's teaching, Israel learns to distinguish between them and the nations, between holy and unholy, pure and unclean, true prophets and fake prophets. Godlessness, sin and false prophecy have no legitimate place within Israel. This was in the service of Israel's mission to be a light to the nations. God formed his people so that they might also proclaim his praise among the nations (Deut. 4:5-9; Isa. 43:21).

4. Practices and rituals

God's communion with his people also takes shape in practices and rituals: circumcision, Sabbaths, feasts, Sabbath-years and Jubilees, and all the constant liturgy and service of atonement in his sanctuary. In that sanctuary, the ark of God's covenant was the continuous heart, with the mercy seat on it and the summary statute of the covenant in it.

God further bestowed upon Israel, among other things, holy assemblies with their liturgy, priestly (and later rabbinical) teaching of the law, administration of justice and the appearance of numerous prophets. In the book of Psalms, the Spirit bestowed upon God's people a collection of songs for praising God and singing out their faith at home and in the temple. God's purpose with all these gifts was to teach His people a conscious and heartfelt life with and for Him. He made every effort to make them a confessing people.

5. Incidental and continuous

In addition to the occasional prophets with their updating and appealing messages, the LORD bestowed the institutionalized service of priests. Israel not only needed vivid words of prophets at special times, there was a continuous cult and constant flow of priestly teaching. This preserved the people from forgetting God's words and from being reduced to what was found appealing at particular times.

From the New Testament

The Old Testament created expectations that were only incompletely realized. Israel needed redemption and a new covenant. When Jesus comes as the Messiah and the Holy Spirit is poured out on all God's servants male and female, it also colors personal and communal confession.

1. Confessing Jesus Christ

The confession of the church concentrates in the confession of Christ. He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God (Mat. 16:16). All of creation is inconceivable without the Son and Word of God. He leaves His mark on all that was, is and is to come. He is indissolubly connected to His Church which He leads and animates throughout the ages (Col. 1:15-18).

In the new covenant, Jesus Christ acts as supreme prophet, only priest and eternal king. He proclaims the gospel of the kingdom (Luke 4:18,19; 4:42-44). His signs demonstrate His message (Luke 7:16). He teaches us to confess Him as Lord and Savior (Acts 2:36) and to longingly look forward to and pray for the coming of God's kingdom (Mat. 6:10). Happy is he who hears and keeps and does His words and who builds his life on them (Mat. 7:24-27; Luke 11:27,28).

It is He who became man and received God's Spirit in all His fullness and who, in His humiliation and exaltation, brings reconciliation with God and redemption (Col. 1:18-20). Through Him we may draw near to God as priests. Whoever believes in Him has eternal life (John 3:16; 11:25,26; 17:3).

He received the name above all name (Phil. 2:9-11; Heb. 1:3,4). He is Lord of all and everything (1 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 1:20-23). He protects and preserves us (2 Tim. 4:18; 1 Pet. 1:4,5) and brings us into the world filled with praise for the Almighty and for the Lamb (Rev. 4:11; 5:13; 7:12; 15:3,4).

2. Christ's teaching

Confession is fruit of Christ's own teaching. During his life, Christ shows what devotion to his Father's will is. He shows throughout his life what the kingdom of God brings. When speaking to his disciples just before his crucifixion, Christ promises them his Spirit who will lead them into all truth, cause them to witness and bear fruit (John 14-16). Our confession is part of following Christ.

In His prayer to His Father (John 17), we hear our Savior praying for those whom the Father gave Him out of the world. He prays for the unity of His disciples and for the sanctification in the truth of all who come to believe through their word. He wants them to appeal to the world with their unity to believe in Him and His Father. It is beautiful to hear the Lord pray in this way for the unity, holiness, Christianity and apostolicity of the Church.

Around His death and resurrection, Christ leaves His disciples baptism and the Lord's supper as a sign and seal of His abiding covenant. He teaches His disciples to remember Him permanently in His self-surrender, nearness and glorification (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:23-26) and to continue to keep what He taught and commanded us as our Savior and Lord (Mat. 28:18-20). Both sacraments support following and confessing Christ.

The Holy Spirit bestows gifts to function together as the body of Christ.

3. The Holy Spirit

Confession is fruit of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the Spirit is poured out (Acts 2:33). He dwells in the church of Christ from then on (Eph. 2:22). He brings the gospel into the hearts of believers and writes it into their hearts (Acts 16:14; 2 Cor. 3:3; Eph. 3:16-19). No one can say, "Jesus is Lord" except through the action of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). The Spirit familiarizes believers with God (Heb. 8:10,11) and makes them call upon God as Father (Rom. 8:15,16; Gal. 4:6). He connects them to God and to one another (2 Cor. 13:13). He sanctifies and leads them and makes them fight against sin (Gal. 5:13-26). He gives them gifts to function together as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12). He also prompts them to stand up in the world and come out for Christ (Mat. 10:20; Jn. 14:26).

Christ sent his Spirit as an advocate for his disciples and as an accuser against the devil and his kingdom. The Spirit's testimony about Christ is decisive in God's lawsuit with his world. It relieves and frees those who believe, and it burdens and condemns those who reject it (John 15:17; 16:7-11; Rev. 12:11).

4. The gospel of Christ

Confession flows from the gospel of Christ. The gospel of Christ is God's saving power for those who believe (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18). Breathed by the Spirit, it encourages, exhorts, teaches, refutes, corrects and edifies (2 Tim. 3:16,17).

This gospel is destined to be proclaimed in the church (2 Tim. 4:2), taught (Matt. 28:19,20; 1 Tim. 3:2; 4:13), transmitted to coming generations (2 Tim. 2:2) and spread throughout the world (Matt. 10:32; Mar. 16:15; Luke 24:46-48; Rom. 1:5; 16:25,26). It is a word that applies to all our lives and that even princes and governments need to hear (Acts 9:15; 23:11; Acts 24-26; Rom. 13:1-7; Phil. 1:13; 1 Tim. 2:2-4; 1 Pet. 2:11-17).

The gospel of Christ comes to all in the same way. All have an anointing from the Holy One and know Him, live with Him and serve Him (Acts 2:17-21; Rom. 8:14; Heb. 8:11; 1 Pet. 2:5,9; 1 Jn. 2:20,27). The gospel prompts them all to respond. In the worship services, all confess their guilt, all offer the praise of the confession of their lips, all offer the incense of their prayers (1 Jn. 1:9; Heb. 13:15; Rev. 8:4). All have to abide by faith, the standard God has given to each in the church (Rom. 12:3).

What has been handed down to us as the gospel and what we have received from Christ and His Spirit must not only be preserved against all opposing forces, mixing and reduction. It must also increasingly fill the church so that it grows as a body toward Him who is the Head, Christ (Eph. 1:23; 2:21; 3:19; 4:13-16; 2 Pet. 3:17,18). Confessing the gospel is a living thing!

5. The church of Christ

Confession belongs to the church of Christ. The church is the house in which God dwells and works through His Spirit and Word (Eph. 2:19-22). There the light of God shines, God's goodness is tasted and the beneficent word of God and the power of the world to come is experienced (Heb. 6:4,5). God's Spirit works faith and new life there, binding together and giving growth (Gal. 5:13-26).

Christ's church is chosen by Him and called to the service of the living God (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:3-10; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Pet. 2:9). She is Christ's and she is there for Christ (Rom. 14:7,8). She shows in her Christian walk and in her love who is her Father and who is her Teacher (Matt. 5:16; Jn. 13:35). She is recognizable by her faithfulness to the apostles' teaching and by her close fellowship (Acts 2:42; cf. also Heb. 10:23-25). She lovingly adheres to the truth believing, praying and celebrating and cherishes what she receives from the Spirit: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one hope, one God and Father who is above all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:3-6).

In her meetings, the gospel of Christ is proclaimed and taught (1 Tim. 5:17), in them she confesses her Lord (Heb. 13:15), sings psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:18), prays (1 Tim. 2:1,2) and celebrates her mutual fellowship (Acts 2:42). God's great deeds bring her to speak (Acts 2:11). She is wary of those who sow discord by going against what she has been taught (Rom. 16:17). As the house of the living God, truth is her foundation and corner pillar (1 Tim. 3:15). By adhering to the truth, she grows toward Him who is the Head (Eph. 4:15).

Those who form the church are willing to confess their Lord before men (Mat. 10:32) and to account for the hope she has thanks to the gospel of Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). The church continues Christ's mission in the world (John 20:21-23) in the midst of an unbelieving and sometimes even hostile environment (Phil. 2:15,16; 1 Pet. 2:12; Rev. 11:1-13).

From Christ, for the purpose of equipping her for her internal and external vocation, the church has received the gift of baptism and the Lord's Supper and of people who help, encourage and lead her in the building and building up for which all members know themselves responsible (Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Thess. 5:12-14). By competent and trustworthy people the gospel is to be handed down (2 Tim. 2:2).

Insistent are the calls to keep his words, to stick to sound doctrine and to contend for the faith handed down to the saints.

6. Against falsehood and herecy

Faith as a bond to Christ is closely tied to the content of faith. Insistent are the calls in the New Testament to accept no other gospel than that of Christ. But also to keep His words, to abide by sound doctrine and to contend for the faith handed down to the saints (2 Cor. 11:2; Gal. 1:5-9; Eph. 4:15; 1 Tim. 1:10; 1 Tim. 4:1-5; 2 Tim. 4:3; Tit. 1:9; 2:1,7,10; 1 Jn. 2:23,24; 2 Jn. 7-11; Jud. 3). The lie of the devil (John 8:44; Rom. 16:17-20), the temptation of the world (2 Pet. 2 and Jud.; 1 Jn. 2:15-17) and the corruption of one's own heart must be recognized and resisted (Gal. 5:24; 1 Pet. 2:11). Confessing the gospel additionally means: exposing and refuting prevailing trends and developments where necessary. Pastors must be not only competent but also trustworthy (2 Tim. 2:2) and adhere to sound doctrine. Ministers should keep the secret of the faith and teach in it. Those who will not do so are not fit to be given leadership roles in the church (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:14).

7. The sound doctrine

It is important not to take terms such as "doctrine," "sound doctrine" and "confession" that appear in the New Testament anachronistically as designating our confessional writings. The latter did not exist at that time.

Elements designated as confessional in the New Testament often do not yet have a fixed, unified form and are generally limited to confessions of Christ (Matt. 16:16; Acts 8:37; Rom. 10:9,10; 1 Cor. 8:6; 12:3; 15:3-7; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 2:5,6; 3:16). Paul speaks of his gospel, of that which he taught the churches and the good that was handed down to us, but nowhere do we find an explicit description of it. The common faith of the apostles that we find in the New Testament was formulated by the early church in the Twelve Articles and the Nicene Creed. These can be characterized as "making explicit the implicit" (J. van Bruggen).

Summary

A living church confesses her Lord, and a confessing church lives with her Lord. Confessing our faith collectively and personally is a matter of the heart. To be confessing church, then, requires more than a text in stone or on paper. God's Spirit wants to write the words of God in the hearts of believers (2 Cor. 3). To continue to follow Him, we also want to reject or prevent error with our confession.

Looking back, we can say that a confessing church is called to in word and deed:

1. To honor and confess the Triune God as Father, Son and Spirit, in liturgy and life.
2. To confess Jesus as God-sent Messiah, as Son of God and Lord.
3. To respond with actual love to God's great deeds in Jesus Christ and in the Spirit, to his promises and gospel and to the proclamation of his will.
4. To remain faithful to the gospel and the mind of Christ.
5. To be united and unanimous with the church of all ages and all places.
6. To grow in faith through both living proclamation and constant teaching.
7. To hand over God's great deeds in Christ to future generations.
8. To confess Christ and His Father in words and deeds before men.
9. To give externally to others, governments and in society account for faith and Christian hope.
10. To protect each other from unholiness, falsehood and error.
11. To give voice in contemporary ways liturgically, witnessing and teaching to the Word of God written also for today.

This overview allows us to give a further interpretation of the six functions we distinguished earlier (see Chapter 2, Six Functions of Confession). The following table shows how the various aspects of confession from the above enumeration can be distributed among the six functions:

Praising and believing	1, 2, 3
Connecting	4, 5
Orientation	3, 4, 6, 11
Tradition	6, 7, 8, 11
Witnessing	8, 9
Protection	4, 10

3. Review of the history of our confession

From the beginning, the Christian church was a confessing church. When we confess, we do so in communion with the tradition and fellowship of the church of the ages. As a confessing church, we are grateful for what we received from Christians before us. In this chapter we outline the fruits of our tradition and draw some lessons from history. In this historical overview, we outline how the confessing church took shape over the centuries. After all, we are not starting from scratch today, but rather building on the tradition of the church.

Creeds of the Early Church

The new church order of the NGK states that we accept with the general Christian church the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed as an ecumenical confession of faith in the Triune God.

- The Apostles' Creed originated in the first or second century, originally as a confession of baptism, and as such is characterized as a confession of faith in Father, Son and Spirit.
- The Nicene Creed (325/318) explicitly confesses that Jesus Christ is God, one in essence with the Father. Noteworthy further is the soteriological indication that the Son came down from heaven "for the sake of us men and for our salvation" and that He was also crucified "for us," suffered etc. The confession about the Holy Spirit was also expanded from the Apostles' Creed. It was later added that the Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son" (the so-called *filioque*, which was a breaking point with the Eastern Orthodox Church).
- The Creed of Athanasius originated in France in the late fifth or early sixth century. This confession lays out "the general belief" about the Trinity and the divine and human nature of Christ. 'If anyone does not keep this fully and intact, he will undoubtedly be lost forever.' Noteworthy are the ontological attributes of God mentioned: uncreated, immeasurable, eternal, omnipotent. They show something of the original context.

The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are widely used in the liturgy. The Athanasian Creed is an apologetic writing. When it is used liturgically, it is generally limited to the so-called "Trinity Sunday.

Confessions of the Reformation

The new church order then declares that with other churches of the Reformation we accept the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt as the basis for our unity, to build upon them together. It is notable that these Reformed confessional writings have a placeholder in their name: Heidelberg, Belgium, Dordrecht. They belong to a broader family of Reformed confessions, such as the French Confession, the Scottish Confession, the Second Swiss Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Confession of Beza. These confessions have strong similarities in content despite differences between them. In terms of content they form one family and all have a prescriptive, normative character. The latter in distinction from Mennonite confessions which are only descriptive.

Against the denominational variation in the Reformed world, the uniformity in Lutheranism, which ultimately results in the *Formula Concordiae*, stands out. Earlier it was noticeable that Calvin's attitude toward Luther was characterized by more openness than vice versa.

The Belgic Confession was already accepted by the Reformed churches in the Netherlands at the first Synod after the Reformation (Emden 1571) as their common agreement, together with the French Confession. From 1586, school teachers were required to subscribe to the Heidelberg Catechism. The Synod of Dordrecht 1618-19 passes judgment in a doctrinal dispute between Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants. In consultation with delegates from numerous European countries, the Canons of Dordt are established, which - as the name implies - were intended as rules for preaching and teaching in the church.

The Synod of Dordrecht urges catechesis at home, at school and in the church and stipulates that the Heidelberg Catechism be treated in the sermon in the afternoon services.

At the same synod, the commitment to the three forms of unity was definitively established by a signing form, in which the signatories declared that they were cordially convinced that the doctrine of the three forms of unity - the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt - in all parts corresponded entirely with God's Word. In case they should ever receive any objection to these teachings or any dissenting opinion, they promise not to expound it openly or otherwise but to submit their sentiments to the Church Assemblies and submit to their judgment. The Synod further insists on catechesis at home, at school and in the church and stipulates that the Heidelberg Catechism be treated in the sermon during the afternoon services.

In Anglo-Saxon Presbyterianism, a milestone was reached in the adoption of the Westminster Confession (containing the Major and Minor Catechisms) by the Westminster Assembly in 1647. This confession is consistent with earlier Reformed confessions and incorporates developments in Reformed theology of the time not found in older Reformed confessions. For Presbyterian churches worldwide, the Westminster Confession is still the standard when it comes to confession. The GkV has had ecclesiastical ties with Presbyterian churches that have accepted the Westminster Confession, since the 1967 Synod of Amersfoort-West. This is done according to the fundamental rule as expressed in article 47 of the 1978 Church Order of the GkV: with churches of Reformed confession abroad, ecclesial fellowship shall be exercised to the greatest extent possible. On minor points of church order and church practice, foreign churches will not be condemned.

Nineteenth century

The nineteenth century produced no new relevant confessional texts. However, this century was dominated by the question of the manner and scope of binding to the Reformed confession. Best known is the struggle within the Reformed church around the question of whether the confession binds "because" (*quia*) it is in accordance with the Word of God, or whether it binds "insofar as" (*quatenus*) it corresponds to the Word of God. In the latter case, even the divine authority of the Bible and the resurrection of Christ could be denied. Known further is the adage of the so-called "ethical movement" that "not doctrine, but the Lord" determines the church.

When it comes to the scope of the binding, the Reformed Synod indicates that this is about "essence and substance" of the confession, while the so-called confessional movement opts for the pair of concepts "unambiguous and open-minded."

While the confessing character of the church was under pressure, the restoration of the church was pursued in various ways. One group chose the so-called medical way of allowing the health-giving teaching of God's Word (the Reformation) to come through. Others sought that restoration along the so-called legal path by returning to Reformed confession and church government (the Secession).

A question that arises in the nineteenth century and continues to live within the Dutch churches in the centuries that follow concerns so-called "doctrinal discipline": does the church only pronounce a theological judgment on doctrine or does it also attach disciplinary consequences to it?

Confessions in twentieth and twenty-first centuries

In the 10s and 20s of the twentieth century there were calls in the Reformed churches for expansion of confession, especially around the authority of Scripture. At the Synod of Arnhem (1930), a proposal of a confession on Sacred Scripture is discussed. Ultimately, the synod decided that a new confession on Scripture was not necessary. One factor in the discussion was the fear of binding too far. Expanding confessions to include new texts with more far-reaching formulations of the church's teachings could end up undermining the confession rather than advancing it.

Later on in the twentieth century, attempts are made not to supplement the existing confession in some part, but to write an example of a new confession to give words to the faith of the Reformation in a fresh way. In 1949, the Nederlands Hervormde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) adopted the writing *Fundamentals and Perspectives of Confession*. In 1973 the Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (synodal) sends to the churches a *Example of Faith Testimony* prepared by professors G.C. Berkouwer and H.N. Ridderbos. As it happens, neither document involves binding.

Confessions arose outside the Netherlands as well. Two of them owe their character to the special situation in which they were written: the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1935) confesses Jesus Christ in the face of the National Socialist regime in Germany, the Belhar Confession (1986) speaks out against apartheid and racism in South Africa. Two other confessions give a more general testimony of faith. The Christian Reformed Churches adopted "Our world belongs to God" in 1986 (followed by an update in 2008). The Reformed Church of America had previously adopted a contemporary statement of faith, "Our Song of Hope" (1978). Both testimonies are intended as a contemporary and enthusiastic text that provides prompts for liturgy, teaching and outward witness in clearly recognizable alignment with the Reformed confessional scriptures. These testimonies do not replace existing confessions but are testimonial supplements to them.

In the twenty-first century, the Netherlands has once again produced a number of texts with a testimonial character.

- The 2005 GS Amersfoort-Centrum of the GKv established an Advice "Sunday, LORDly Day" (in response to tension around the fourth commandment), but did not want to make it binding.
- Two other texts originated at the initiative of Mission organization De Verre Naaste and were written by an international group: the *Candlestand Statement* (on the charismatic movement) and the *Polarlight Declaration* (on the ecumenical nature of the Church). These statements were not intended as confessions and have not been accepted as such.

The National Synod, a platform for a common Christian witness in society, came out with its own creed in 2009. Its text is not intended as a church creed or as a replacement for any church creed. It reflects a consensus among the participating parties for their joint outward action.

Finally, we mention the "Ordinary Catechism" presented in 2019 by three theological teachers (from PKN, CGK and GKv). In one hundred questions and answers, it presents the teaching of the Bible in a way that is consistent with developments in Reformed theology and usable in church teaching. The text is not ecclesiastically calibrated, but receives quite some attention.

The (shared and reunited) house of liberation

With the reunification of NGK and GKv, two churches are coming together again that originated together from the Vrijmaking (liberation) (1944). In the 1930s there was a so-called "Reformation movement" within the Reformed Churches. This movement rediscovered the Bible's relational and dynamic speaking of God's covenant with people. At the same time, under the influence of the existentialism of the time, a strong emphasis on normativity and objectivity emerged. The clashes surrounding these movements

within the churches led to the Liberation. The churches that emerged then had different wings between which tensions grew.

The tensions led to a schism in the 1960s, partly around the binding character of confessions. Various motives played a role: the importance of freedom of individual churches, emphasis on the Bible versus doctrinal rigidity, awareness of the historical character of the Reformed confessions, and the importance of reliability in being bound to a confession. The assessment of what was contained in the so-called Open Letter of Oct. 31, 1966, regarding confession took on a shibboleth function in church procedures. It led to a split between what subsequently came to be called the GKv and the NGK.

The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands reject strict binding to the doctrine of the Three Forms of Unity within the GKv.

In the preamble to the Agreement of Church Life of the NGK, these churches "- giving themselves first to the Lord and to one another - promise to hold to the Word of God and to the confession of the church of all ages. They declare that in that confession of the Truth of Holy Scripture, as expressed in the three Forms of Unity, they find their unity and the ground for their union." The NGK accept (silent) reservations about parts of the doctrine, assuming that one's ministry generally adheres to what is mutually agreed upon. The NGK reject strict binding to the doctrine of the Three Forms of Unity within the GKv. Only when the central content of biblical doctrine is at issue is censorship of ministers proceeded to. Very openly, this is expressed in the tolerance exercised with a deviation from Sunday 22 HC.

There is a difference of opinion in the GKv about the extent to which church members are bound to Reformed doctrine. Ministers bind themselves to Reformed doctrine through their signing of the binding form. In the common understanding, this does not bind them to what are called "all dots and commas," but rather to "all parts" of the doctrine. Views have been expressed about the way God is spoken of in Article 1 NGB, about the authorship of Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations and the letter to the Hebrews, about the "descent into hell" and about the three offices that are like a council of the church according to Article 30 NGB, which did not lead to church discipline. As in the NGK, pastors are sometimes uncomfortable with formulations in the confession without publicly expressing them. In the liturgy, the formulation used for unity of doctrine is: whether one confesses the teachings of the Old and New Testaments summarized in the Apostles' Creed and proclaimed here in the Christian Church as the true and perfect doctrine of our salvation.

In 2017, GKv and NGK expressed the desire to come to one church community, based on Scripture as the word of God, bound to the Reformed confessional scriptures and arranged according to the principles of Reformed church polity. In 2020, the synod of the GKv, without commenting on the contents of the Open Letter, confessed guilt over the function of shibboleth granted to the Open Letter. In 2022, a committee was appointed by GKv and NGK to make proposals to anchor the confession in the reunified church.

Catechesis and formation

A confessing church is a church that wants to pass on its confession to new generations. Therefore, catechesis and formation are important. In the early church, catechesis based on the great commission in Matthew 28 takes place prior to baptism. At baptism, one solemnly recites the learned confession of faith. After baptism, one is further initiated into the other rituals of the Church and taught the mysteries of salvation. In the Middle Ages, catechesis falls into decline. The teaching that is still given is linked to confession and moralistic in nature.

In the Reformation, which attached great importance to the knowledge of "the true and perfect doctrine of salvation" and a personal decision of faith, catechesis was given its place between baptism and Holy Communion. The public profession of faith that concludes catechesis opens access to the Lord's Supper for baptized members. A multitude of textbooks appear. Important is the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism, which provides a qualitative and unifying impulse in church teaching.

The centuries that follow show flattening and impoverishment in one place and deepening and internalization in another. The Catechism falls into disuse or is replaced by other textbooks. In the churches of the Secession and Doleantie, the Reformed Confession experiences a revival.

From the late 1970s, attention to the didactics of catechesis grew, followed from the 1990s by increasing attention to pedagogy and agogics.

If we look at the last half century, we see that in catechesis within the churches of the Liberation, the tradition of content dominated, with the Heidelberg Catechism taking center stage. In addition to the Catechism, *Instruction in Christian doctrine* was used: *Onderwijzing in de christelijke leer. Korte verklaring van de Heidelbergse Catechismus ten gebruike voor het Catechetisch Onderwijs* (part I by M.B. van 't Veer, 1948 and part II by E. Th. Van den Born, 1949; published in cooperation with Stichting De Vrije Kerk by Erven A. de Jager, Groningen). Later use was made of the booklet by J. van Bruggen, *Annotations: Aantekeningen bij de Heidelbergse Catechismus ten dienste van het catechetisch onderwijs in de Geref. Kerken in Nederland*, Assen (Horstman, 1^e druk 1951, 5^e druk 1965).

From the late 1970s, there was more attention to the didactics of catechesis followed from the 1990s by increasing attention to pedagogy and agogics. New catechesis methods appeared: *DE Weg, Ik geloof, Zeg nuzelf, Follow Up*. Meanwhile, interaction, practical assignments and the use of videos and music have become indispensable.

Education in Reformed schools saw a similar development. In elementary schools, "Naam en feit" gave way to "Levend water." In secondary education, subjects such as Bible *knowledge* and the *doctrine* of faith were taught. The doctrine of faith was treated on the basis of the Belgic Confession with the help of books such as J. van Bruggen, *Het Amen van de kerk* and by C. Bijl, *Leren geloven*. Both subjects are now summarized under the name religious education and focus on lived faith.

Youth groups and Bible study groups did not remain unaffected either. Whereas in the past Bible study, church history, confession and free topics were on the agenda, today church history and confession have mostly been dropped. Discussions have become more personal and practical.

Formation and education are not limited to young people. In many a congregation, courses for confessing members have been and continue to be held. In the world of catechesis, the case is being made for adult catechesis and intergenerational catechesis: you remain in the church "Always a student," as the title of a 2011 basic book of catechesis reads.

The Reformed world in the twentieth century had a diversity of means of tradition: book series, magazines, courses (*From Yesterday to Tomorrow*, study evenings by J. Douma and J. van Bruggen). Here, too, more and more attention came to the aspect of formation. It began with the Gereformeerd Vormings Instituut, Reformed Formation Institute. Then came national centers for church growth and faith practice. We now have the Kerkpunt. In addition, there is a wide range of conferences and interdenominational incentives for reflection and formation. To name a few: Alpha, Weetwatjegeloof, New Wine, Samen jong.

Liturgy

Liturgy and confession are inseparable. It is not an exaggeration to say that confession originated in the liturgy. It was briefly mentioned above that the oldest confession, the Apostles' Creed, probably originated at the baptismal liturgy. If you could confess these words, then you could be baptized. The Nicene Creed became the true liturgical confession. Across the breadth of the church, this confession has had a place in the liturgy for centuries. Between Bible reading and Eucharist in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, this confession returns every church service. Ditto in Anglican and Lutheran liturgies. Among Reformed people in the Netherlands, the confession ended up in the afternoon service, after the sermon. There the Apostles' Creed was alternated with the Nicene Creed. With the abolition of the afternoon service in Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the singing or reading of one of the creeds is also under pressure.

Of the three forms of unity, the Heidelberg Catechism in particular was given a liturgical place among Dutch Protestants. In the afternoon service, the reading and explanation of a "Sunday" of the catechism was a regular part of the worship service. Combined with catechetical teaching, the Heidelberg Catechism acquired a place in the religious experience of generations of Reformed people. With the disappearance of afternoon services and the adoption of a different approach to learning services, this prominent liturgical place is also under pressure in today's NGK. This history shows how important the place of confessions in the liturgy is for keeping the confession alive.

There is also a more indirect way in which confession is related to the liturgy in Reformed churches. Here we mean the liturgical forms. Those forms surrounding confirmation and sacraments speak the language of confession and function as such. They are one of the few fixed elements in the Reformed liturgy.

Whereas these forms had a place in the liturgy more or less unchanged, their use within the NGK has declined sharply over the last 20 years and in some places disappeared altogether.

What observations do we make?

Besides the concrete fruits our tradition has produced and the strong conviction of the importance of scriptural confession that characterizes it, a few things stand out in the historical sketch offered.

1. While the Lutheran tradition sought uniformity, the original Reformed tradition was characterized by a multiplicity of related confessions. Calvin was more open to Luther than vice versa. In later centuries, the recognition of kinship also extended to the Presbyterian Westminster Confession.
2. The Synod of Dordt 1618-19 established a strongly worded signing form. The precise scope of the commitment made therein has been the subject of struggle throughout the centuries. Not only have people distanced themselves from that commitment, but from the nineteenth century onward, in circles that did want to adhere to it, all kinds of nuanced descriptions and considerations were put forward in addition to the strictly-literal view.
3. It is striking how the Reformed world of the Netherlands and North America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries searches for new articulation of the Catholic faith, but shrinks from establishing new binding texts. It suffices with "examples," "declarations" and "testimonies." Expressly, they receive no binding status.
4. Catechesis in recent decades has shown an increasing need for more than the exposition and mastery of the Heidelberg Catechism. The desire for relevant and practically useful study material led to more contemporary forms and updated content.

4. How do we move forward?

In Christ and through the Spirit, God comes close to us, we experienced as a committee at the start, as we reflected on the important task we were facing. The fact that Jesus comes closer awakens desire to live close to God, led by His Spirit. From that desire, we set to work on our assignment to reflect on a confessing church.

As confessing churches, we respond to God's nearness in faith, hope, and love. We long for the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands to be confessing churches. That means we listen to our God and live in faith as children of the Father, sharing in the Son, while the Spirit dwells in us. Then we can stand for the gospel of Father, Son and Spirit and respond by confessing our faith in Father, Son and Spirit.

That answering and confessing is a communal activity. We long for connection and fellowship in love and truth. Therefore, we would like to see members of the congregation enter and remain in conversation with each other about the content of that gospel and what it means for their lives. When that happens, the faith can also be passed on to new generations. In this way the faith remains alive and we can live as God's witnesses in a world where faith in God no longer comes naturally. We can help each other with our faith perspective and discern what matters most.

For that, first of all, we need that we live with the Triune God and that there is faith, hope, and love in our hearts. The love of the Father, the grace of Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit are the basis of a confessing church. This never goes without saying, but we need to be constantly reminded of this.

It is then our task as a church to also look at what we as a church should do concretely to encourage that we are a confessing church, that the confession of the church is alive and anchored to Scripture. By confessing (six functions, see Chapter 2):

1. we praise God and express our faith;
2. we connect ourselves to the community of believers;
3. we offer practical orientation;
4. we pass on the faith to future generations;
5. we bear witness to our faith;
6. we protect one another in the congregation from error and falsehood.

What specific opportunities do we see for the coming years?

Our conclusion is that we want to enliven confession so that people of our time - of all generations - can actively exercise all the functions of confession in an inspired way. This requires three things: good texts, good means of communication and a good process to involve the people in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

Good texts

We want to further explore which texts are most appropriate: (1) existing texts from tradition, (2) existing recent texts (e.g., [Our World Belongs to God](#)), or (3) newly developed texts.

(1) Existing texts from tradition are already there and have authority as confessions accepted by the churches (the creeds of the early church and the three confessions from the time of the Reformation: BC, HC and CoD). They connect us both to the past and to Christians in other churches worldwide. They interpret the teaching of the Bible and in them provide much material for all functions of confession. Older church members have grown up with these and have their hearts set on familiar formulations. Because these confessions originated in a different time, we miss the results of later ecclesiastical reflection and deliberation as well as unmasking and refuting contemporary developments and trends. Old texts can evoke alienation because we don't know their context well, and because they don't speak in language that fits directly into our postmodern and post-Christian world.

(2) Existing recent text(s) no longer need to be devised and written. Materials suitable for various functions of confession have also already been developed. They fit the experience and themes of our time

and are already used in an international context. On the other hand, they require regular adaptation to stay current and up to date. We should investigate further whether they do indeed adequately address the themes and questions of Dutch Christians in our churches and whether there are other concerns.

(3) Creating new texts is a lengthy process that requires a lot of time and energy and may not only lead to unity, but may also make divisions visible. On the other hand, this can also be a very valuable process that initiates a broad substantive reflection on what we believe as Dutch Reformed Christians and how we relate to the world around us. This can create new enthusiasm. Incidentally, the same can be done with option 2.

We note that these options need not exclude each other; but that combinations are possible, in which it is quite possible to assign different status to different texts.

Good means of communication

This includes written text as well as visual resources, songs, art, liturgical practices and a variety of digital resources. What resources and materials are needed and how they are created will likely vary by function of confession. We realize that texts have become less of a factor with the shift to an (online) visual culture, and that there is an abundance of resources. This makes the strategic use of good communication tools all the more a major concern.

A good process

What is a good process depends, on the one hand, on which option is chosen. On the other hand, it seems important to us at least that what we do to vitalize confession is not a process of a small group, but that it takes place across the width of local congregations. A process that involves theologians, pastors, ministers and church members of all generations. It is important to connect to what God is giving in all parts of the church. Not only the end result of the process in the form of appealing texts and other means of communication, but especially the process of reflection in itself we see as an essential part of enlivening confession. In any case, the search for new forms of giving attention to the content of faith can be fruitful only if the approach chosen is not top-down. What possibilities there are for such a process and how it can be implemented still requires much thought. A question that can also be asked is whether we want to do all this alone as Reformed Churches in the Netherlands or whether it would be better to cooperate with other churches in this, and if so, which ones.

In conclusion

We are curious to hear what these options evoke in you and what you think will most help the local congregations of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands to enliven their confessions.

It was also our task to think about anchoring confession to Scripture and binding it to confession. We have thought about this and we see the importance and value of this binding, but our thinking about it is not yet complete. We would like to continue this in a follow-up process.

We ask that you commission a new committee to make choices based on the above, further think through questions of anchoring and binding, and present their proposals to the next Synod. Some members of the current confessional church committee will be happy to participate in this.